



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



THURSDAY — 27 JAN 2022

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HEADLINE	01/26 UW language guide: problematic words
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/university-language-guide-says-grandfather-housekeeping-spirit-animal-are-problematic-words
GIST	<p>A University of Washington language guide is calling everyday words used by Americans "problematic."</p> <p>The University of Washington Information Technology department released an "inclusive language guide" that lists a number of "problematic words" that are "racist," "sexist," "ageist," or "homophobic."</p> <p>According to the guide, words such as "grandfather," "housekeeping," "minority," "ninja," and "lame" are considered "problematic words."</p> <p>For example, the language guide states that the word "lame" is considered problematic because it's "ableist."</p> <p>"This word is offensive, even when it's used in slang for uncool because it's using a disability in a negative way to imply that the opposite, which would be not lame, to be superior," the guide states.</p> <p>The guide also states that the term "minority" implies a 'less than' attitude toward a certain community.</p> <p>"When 'minority' is used to refer to other races or abilities, used as a generalized term for 'the other' and implies a 'less than' attitude toward the community or communities being discussed," the guide states.</p> <p>The guide considers "grandfather" a "problematic word" because the term was "used as a way to exempt some people from a change because of conditions that existed before the change."</p> <p>"'Grandfather clause' originated in the American South in the 1890s as a way to defy the 15th Amendment and prevent black Americans from voting," the guide explains.</p> <p>"Housekeeping," is another "problematic" word that the guide recommends should be avoided by others working in the information technology industry because it can "feel gendered."</p> <p>Phrases with "man" such as "manpower," "man hours," or "man-in-the-middle" is considered "not inclusive" and "thus sexist."</p> <p>The language guide also considers "preferred pronouns" as "problematic" because the term "preferred" suggests that "a person's pronoun is optional."</p> <p>Language such as "no can do," "spirit animal," and separating groups based on certain colors is "racist" or culturally appropriative.</p> <p>According to the language guide, using "red," white," or "yellow" to separate different teams is based on "racist tropes."</p> <p>"Using colors based as racist tropes — labelling [sic] 'white' as good, 'black' as bad, 'red' as attackers, or 'yellow' as excluded third parties — is offensive," the guide states.</p> <p>The term "spirit animal" is also "problematic" because it uses "cultural appropriation," according to the guide.</p>

	<p>Employees within the University of Washington Information Technology department are also encouraged to contact vendors who use the "problematic words and phrases" and ask them to avoid terms that come from "racist, ableist and/or sexist origins."</p> <p>The webpage gives a sample prompt for employees to use when sending emails to vendors about this issue as well.</p> <p>"Unfortunately, in working with your product/service we have identified language that can be considered offensive due to its racist, ableist and/or sexist origins," the email prompt states. "Can you let us know what efforts you are undertaking to move away from this language so as to create a more inclusive product/service?"</p>
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HEADLINE	01/27 China to US: stop interfering in Olympics
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2022/01/27/Beijing-Olympics-Wang-Yi-Antony-Blinken-stop-interfering-boycott-Taiwan/2941643272868/
GIST	<p>Jan. 27 (UPI) -- China's top diplomat said the United States should stop meddling in the upcoming Beijing Winter Games and warned against "playing with fire" on the Taiwan issue on Thursday.</p> <p>Foreign Minister Wang Yi made the remarks during a call with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday Beijing time, according to a statement from the Chinese foreign ministry.</p> <p>"The top priority at the moment is that the U.S. should stop interfering with the Beijing Winter Olympics, stop playing with fire on the Taiwan issue and stop creating small anti-China cliques," Wang said, according to the statement.</p> <p>Washington is not sending official representation to the Beijing Olympics, which kick off on Feb. 4, in a diplomatic boycott over what the White House called China's "ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses."</p> <p>Researchers say that an estimated 1 million predominantly Muslim Uighurs have been held in re-education camps in China's Xinjiang Province and have been subject to abuses that include torture, forced labor and forced sterilization.</p> <p>A handful of allies including Britain, Japan, Australia and Canada have joined in the diplomatic boycott, which China has referred to as a "farce" and against the spirit of the Olympics. American athletes will still participate in the Games.</p> <p>Wang's warning about Taiwan comes after Beijing sent dozens of warplanes through Taipei's air defense identification zone, or ADIZ, this week in its largest show of force in months.</p> <p>China considers Taiwan a breakaway province and has vowed to retake it by force if necessary.</p> <p>The incursion came as the U.S. Navy held joint drills with Japan in the nearby Philippine Sea and conducted freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, drawing condemnation from China.</p> <p>Washington lawmakers also unveiled a bill on Tuesday that looks to bolster U.S. chip manufacturing and improve ties with Taiwan in order to boost competitiveness against China.</p> <p>The State Department readout of the call did not mention the remarks by Wang.</p> <p>The two diplomats also discussed the ongoing crisis on the Ukraine border, where Russia has massed more than 100,000 troops amid concerns of an invasion.</p>

	<p>Blinken "underscored the global security and economic risks posed by further Russian aggression against Ukraine and conveyed that de-escalation and diplomacy are the responsible way forward," the State Department readout said.</p> <p>Wang said that all parties should remain calm and abandon a "Cold War mentality," according to the Foreign Ministry statement. He added that Russia's "reasonable security concerns should be taken seriously and resolved."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/27 China no exit from zero-Covid; offramp?
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/china/no-exit-zero-covid-china-struggles-find-policy-off-ramp-2022-01-27/
GIST	<p>SHANGHAI, Jan 27 (Reuters) - China's "zero-COVID" stance has put it at odds with the rest of the world and is exacting a mounting economic toll, but an exit strategy remains elusive as authorities worry about the ability of the healthcare system to cope and adapt to new strains.</p> <p>Chinese medical experts believed last year that higher vaccination rates would eventually allow China to relax tough rules on movement and testing as infection rates slow elsewhere.</p> <p>The emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant dashed those hopes.</p> <p>While some analysts have branded China's approach as "unsustainable", many local health experts - and some from overseas - say the country has no choice but to continue given its less developed health system.</p> <p>Some even argue China's economy could even emerge stronger than ever if it keeps Omicron at bay.</p> <p>"For a large country with a population of 1.4 billion, it must be said that the cost effectiveness of our country's prevention and control has been extremely high," said Liang Wannian, head of the expert epidemic prevention group at China's National Health Commission, at a Saturday briefing.</p> <p>Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, called on China last week to "reassess" its approach, saying it had now become a "burden" on both the Chinese and global economies.</p> <p>But China is concerned the cost of lowering its defences could prove even higher, especially with a healthcare system that has lagged its broader development.</p> <p>"With a large population and high density the government is rightly concerned about impacts for the spread of the virus," said Jaya Dantas, professor of international health at the Curtin School of Population Health in Perth, Australia.</p> <p>China had 4.7 million registered nurses at the end of 2020, or 3.35 per 1,000 people, official data showed. The United States has around 3 million - around 9 per 1,000.</p> <p>China is also wary of the risk of new variants, especially as it refuses to import foreign vaccines. Studies suggest China's vaccines are less effective against Omicron and it has not yet rolled out its own mRNA version.</p> <p>Wu Zunyou, chief epidemiologist at the Chinese Center For Disease Control and Prevention, warned the "insidious" Omicron could still lead to a rise in the absolute number of deaths even if it was proven to be less deadly, and China must remain patient.</p> <p>"China's medical capacity and standards are not as good as Britain or the United States, but the results of China's coronavirus prevention and control are far, far superior," he said in a weekend interview with the Beijing News.</p> <p>'PREMATURE OPTIMISM'</p>

China has stepped up its health warnings, urging citizens to ignore claims that Omicron is no more serious than the 'flu and to stay vigilant.

On Wednesday, the Global Times, published by the official People's Daily, also lashed out at overseas media for "mocking" China's policies, saying they saved lives.

Foreign criticism was "based on unfounded or premature optimism regarding the end of the pandemic", it added.

Experts in China and overseas have also cast doubt on the hope that Omicron represents the final stage of the pandemic.

"SARS-CoV-2 will not magically turn into a malaria-like endemic infection where levels stay constant for long periods," said Raina MacIntyre, head of the Biosecurity Research Programme at the University of New South Wales' Kirby Institute.

"It will keep causing epidemic waves, driven by waning vaccine immunity, new variants that escape vaccine protection, unvaccinated pockets, births and migration," she told Reuters.

END-GAME

China's economy is expected to slow as a result of COVID related supply disruptions, while lockdowns to douse domestic outbreaks weigh on travel and consumption.

Hong Kong's "zero-COVID" approach has put the Chinese-controlled city out of step with other global finance centres and is battering its economy.

Still, China's economy has remained resilient, with GDP growth at 8.1% last year, far exceeding expectations.

MacIntyre of the Kirby Institute said it wasn't a "binary choice" between opening up and remaining isolated, adding there was "no need to surrender to the virus, as Australia is doing at the moment."

China could still emerge from the crisis in the strongest position, especially if COVID leads to widespread cognitive impairment, organ damage and other long-term conditions in other countries, she said.

"If China keeps the virus largely under control, their population will be fit and healthy into the future, while the United States and Europe will be groaning under an unprecedented burden of chronic disease."

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HEADLINE	01/27 What Olympics? Advertisers lay low
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/what-olympics-advertisers-lay-low-ahead-beijing-winter-games-2022-01-27/
GIST	<p>Jan 27 (Reuters) - Just a week before the opening ceremony of the 2022 Olympic Winter Games, U.S. television viewers can be forgiven for forgetting the date, or even that it is taking place in Beijing, China.</p> <p>Unlike any Games in recent memory, the nearly 20 official international and national Olympic sponsors have laid low, ducking the press and viewers by holding back on the advertising blitz that typically kicks off months ahead the "let the Games begin" pronouncement.</p> <p>By Wednesday, only two spots had launched, both of which focus on athletes with no mention of the host country, with which the United States is feuding on diplomatic and economic fronts.</p>

Over the course of the Games, ad agency executives and advertisers told Reuters that viewers should expect ads to continue to downplay the location and ignore any hint of politics to avoid drawing attention to geopolitical conflict and the hot glare of the Chinese government.

Corporate sponsors and advertisers for the Beijing Olympics, which begin on Feb. 4 and run through Feb. 20, have come under fire for what human rights groups say is the enabling of China's alleged abuses against Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in the country. China denies those allegations.

Global Olympic sponsors were grilled by a bipartisan congressional panel in July, which accused the companies of putting profits ahead of accusations of genocide in China.

"The halo is tarnished," said Mark DiMassimo, founder of New York-based ad agency DiMassimo Goldstein, which represents brands that are not official sponsors but plan to air commercials during the Olympics.

He said his clients decided to strip from their campaigns mentions of traditional Olympic themes - friendly competition, global unity and good sportsmanship - shortly after the Biden administration announced a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Olympics last month.

Bridgestone Corp (5108.T), an official sponsor of the International Olympic Committee, this month began airing a commercial featuring U.S. figure skater Nathan Chen, an Asian American, who advocates for authentic representation in skating, "no matter who you are or where you come from."

Delta Air Lines Inc (DAL.N), the official airline of Team USA, is airing two commercials spotlighting skiers, snowboarders and figure skaters who defy gravity in their events.

German financial services firm Allianz will have a film featuring winter athletes that will play on social media in the United States, a spokesperson said. Last year, Allianz filmed a short video about U.S. Paralympic athlete Matt Stutzman.

When Reuters asked the global and Team USA sponsors about marketing plans for the Olympics, only two responded, one of which declined to comment.

BIG DEPARTURE

This year's response is a big departure from Olympics past, when advertisers crafted ads that embraced the spirit of the Games and honored the culture of the host country.

Microsoft Corp (MSFT.O) last year aired a commercial for the Tokyo Olympics in which Japanese citizens showed famous parts of the city such as the Shibuya Crossing over a Teams call, sharing a piece of Tokyo for people who could not be there due to the pandemic.

A Coca-Cola Co (KO.N) ad for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics featured animated birds stealing straws from Coke drinks to build a replica of the famed Bird's Nest stadium. But that was then.

With the political controversy and the pandemic once again preventing spectators from traveling to the Games, viewers this time around can expect to see fewer mentions of the host city, said Jeremy Carey, managing director of ad agency Optimum Sports, a unit of Omnicom Media Group.

"It's a challenge, quite frankly," he said. "The connection isn't as prevalent as it would normally be."

Focusing on the athletes competing on the global stage is considered the safest strategy for brands, experts said.

"We're trying to steer clear of the geopolitical implications around (the Olympics)," said Chris Brandt, chief marketing officer at Chipotle Mexican Grill Inc (CMG.N). Chipotle will run ads during the Olympics

	<p>promoting “real food for real athletes,” and feature the preferred orders of competitors like U.S. ice hockey player Hilary Knight.</p> <p>Any attempt for a brand to associate themselves with the Beijing Olympics could backfire, DiMassimo said. “You just don’t know. You put (the commercial) on, and it might explode.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/27 World remembers Holocaust
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/2022-international-holocaust-remembrance-day-58c7a1864907d9a80762a20d3c960487
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS (AP) — Holocaust survivors and politicians warned about the resurgence of antisemitism and Holocaust denial as the world remembered Nazi atrocities and commemorated the 77th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp on Thursday.</p> <p>“I have lived in New York for 75 years, but I still remember well the terrible time of horror and hatred,” survivor Inge Auerbacher, 87, told the German parliament. “Unfortunately, this cancer has reawakened and hatred of Jews is commonplace again in many countries in the world, including Germany.”</p> <p>Commemorations took place amid a rise of antisemitism that gained traction during lockdowns as the coronavirus pandemic exacerbated hatred online.</p> <p>“This sickness must be healed as quickly as possible,” Auerbacher said.</p> <p>German parliament speaker Baerbel Bas noted that the coronavirus pandemic has acted “like an accelerant” to already burgeoning antisemitism.</p> <p>“Antisemitism is here — it isn’t just on the extreme fringe, not just among the eternally incorrigible and a few anti-Semitic trolls on the net,” she said. “It is a problem of our society — all of society.”</p> <p>The U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution in November 2005 establishing the annual commemoration, and chose Jan. 27 — the day that Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated by Soviet troops in 1945.</p> <p>Due to the pandemic, many International Holocaust Remembrance Day events were being held online this year again. A small ceremony, however, was to take place at the site of the former Auschwitz death camp, where World War II Nazi German forces killed 1.1 million people in occupied Poland. The memorial site was closed earlier in the pandemic but reopened in June.</p> <p>In all, about 6 million European Jews and millions of other people were killed by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust. Some 1.5 million were children.</p> <p>“Our country bears a special responsibility — the genocide against the European Jews is a German crime,” Bas told a special parliamentary session in Berlin attended by the country’s leaders. “But at the same time it is a past that is everyone’s business -- not just Germans, not just Jews.”</p> <p>Israel’s parliamentary speaker, Mickey Levy, broke down in tears at Germany’s Bundestag while reciting the Jewish mourner’s prayer from a prayer book that belonged to a German Jewish boy who celebrated his bar mitzvah on the eve of Kristallnacht.</p> <p>Levy said that Israel and Germany experienced “an exceptional journey on the way to reconciliation and establishing relations and brave friendship between us.”</p> <p>Auerbacher recalled being nearly hit by a stone thrown by Nazi thugs during the anti-Jewish pogrom of November 1938. In August 1942, she and other Jews were transported to the Theresienstadt camp-ghetto.</p>

"I was 7 years old and the youngest of about 1,100 people, of whom my parents, I and a very few others survived," she said.

Gathered at the European Parliament, EU lawmakers listened to 100-year-old Holocaust survivor Margot Friedlander's ordeal. She was arrested in 1944 while on the run and brought to Theresienstadt, in what is now the Czech Republic. A year before, her mother and brother were deported to Auschwitz, where they were both killed.

Friedlander and her husband immigrated to the U.S. in 1946 and she returned to Berlin in 2010. She has since been traveling around Germany to tell the story of her life and promote remembrance.

"We must be vigilant and not look the other way as we did then," she said. "Hatred, racism and antisemitism must not be the last word in history."

Charles Michel, the head of the EU Council bringing together leaders of the 27 EU member countries, insisted on the importance of commemorating the Shoah as the number of survivors diminishes every year.

"With each passing year, the Shoah inches towards becoming a historical event," Michel said. "More and more distant, more and more abstract. Especially in the eyes of the younger generations of Europeans. This is why, paradoxically, the more the years go by, the more important the commemoration becomes. The more essential."

To tackle Holocaust denial, UNESCO and the World Jewish Congress launched a partnership Thursday with the online platform TikTok popular with youngsters. They say it will allow users to be oriented toward verified information when searching for terms related to the Shoah.

According to the U.N., 17% of content related to the Holocaust on TikTok either denied or distorted the Holocaust.

"All online platforms must take responsibility for the spread of hate speech by promoting reliable sources of information," said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay.

In Italy, members of the Jewish community and lawmakers gathered in Rome's Ghetto to lay a wreath on the site where more than 1,000 people were rounded up and deported to Auschwitz on Oct. 16, 1943. Among the participants in the commemoration was the Italian senator-for-life, Liliana Segre, a 91-year-old survivor of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp who has made educating younger generations about the Holocaust her life's work.

Lello Dell'Ariccia, a member of Rome's Jewish community, said Jan. 27 is a symbol of the Holocaust "as the symbol of the liberation, but fundamentally it is symbolic for all those who died in the concentration camps. And the "Memory Day" is the day that has to commemorate, remember and make us think about what happened."

In Albania, Foreign Minister Olta Xhacka honored the millions of victims but also took pride at his country's role in sheltering Jews, "earning a place among the Righteous Among Nations."

Albania boasts that during world War II it was the only country where no Jews were killed or handed over to the Nazis and their numbers increased from 600 before the war to more than 2,000 by its end. Albanians protected Jewish residents, and helped other Jews who fled from Germany, Austria and other countries by either smuggling them abroad or hiding them.

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HEADLINE	01/27 Russia: US response offers little optimism
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-crisis-live-updates-1b213930aeced003b990adb474ef722b

MOSCOW (AP) — The U.S. rejection of Russia's main demands to resolve the crisis over Ukraine left little ground for optimism, the Kremlin said Thursday, while adding that dialogue was still possible.

Tensions have soared in recent weeks, as the United States and its NATO allies expressed concern that a buildup of about 100,000 Russian troops near Ukraine signaled that Moscow planned to invade its ex-Soviet neighbor. Russia denies having any such designs — and has laid out a series of demands it says will improve security in Europe.

But as expected, the U.S. and the Western alliance firmly rejected any concessions on Moscow's main points Wednesday, refusing to permanently ban Ukraine from joining NATO and saying allied deployments of troops and military equipment in Eastern Europe are nonnegotiable. The U.S. did outline areas in which some of Russia's concerns might be addressed, possibly offering a path to de-escalation.

"There is no change, there will be no change," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, repeating the warning that any Russian incursion into Ukraine would be met with massive consequences and severe economic costs.

All eyes are now on President Vladimir Putin, who will decide how Russia will respond amid fears that Europe could again be plunged into war.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the response from the U.S. — and a similar one from NATO — left "little ground for optimism."

At the same time, he added that "there always are prospects for continuing a dialogue, it's in the interests of both us and the Americans."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that the U.S. response contained some elements that could lead to "the start of a serious talk on secondary issues" but emphasized that "the document contains no positive response on the main issue." Those are the Russian demands for the non-expansion of NATO and the non-deployment of weapons that may threaten Russia.

Lavrov told reporters that top officials will now submit their proposals to Putin, who has the American response, and Peskov said the Russian reaction would come soon.

The evasive official comments reflect the fact that it's Putin who will single-handedly determine Russia's next moves. The Russian leader has warned that he would order unspecified "military-technical measures" if the West refuses to heed the demands.

Peskov added that Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden will decide whether they need to have another conversation following two calls last month.

While the diplomacy sputters on, so, too, do maneuvers that have escalated tensions. Russia has launched a series of military drills: Motorized infantry and artillery units in southwestern Russia practiced firing live ammunition, warplanes in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea performed bombing runs, dozens of warships sailed for training exercises in the Black Sea and the Arctic, and Russian fighter jets and paratroopers arrived in Belarus for joint war games.

Meanwhile, NATO said it was bolstering its deterrence in the Baltic Sea region, and the U.S. ordered 8,500 troops on higher alert for potential deployment to Europe.

Amid the tensions, thousands of Ukrainians expressed their resolve to stand up to the Russian pressure under the hashtag #UkrainiansWillResist on Twitter and Facebook.

"No one will force Ukrainians to accept the Kremlin ultimatum," wrote Andrii Levus, who initiated the online campaign.

Beyond the fears of a Russian invasion in Ukraine, there also has been speculation that Moscow's response could include military deployments to the Western Hemisphere.

While a senior Russian diplomat recently pointedly refused to rule out such deployments to Cuba and Venezuela, a top Putin associate expressed skepticism Thursday at that prospect.

"Cuba and Venezuela are aiming to come out of isolation and restore normal relations with the U.S. to a certain extent, so there can't be any talk about setting up a base there as happened during the Soviet times," Dmitry Medvedev, a deputy head of Russia's Security Council, said in an interview with Russian media.

While he charged that the West is using Ukraine as a way to contain Russia, he somberly acknowledged that a Russia-NATO conflict "would be the most dramatic and simply catastrophic scenario, and I hope it will never happen."

As concerns rise about a possible Russian invasion, another conflict still simmers in Ukraine. In 2014, following the ouster of a Kremlin-friendly president in Kyiv, Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in the country's eastern industrial heartland. Fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed rebels has killed over 14,000 people, and efforts to reach a settlement have stalled.

Ukrainian and Russian envoys and others sat down in Paris on Wednesday to discuss a resolution to that conflict, but Medvedev said that Moscow sees no point in talking to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy — and suggested that only a change in leader would defuse tensions.

He expressed hope that the Ukrainians would eventually become "weary of that bedlam and elect the leadership that would pursue policies ... aimed at normal economic relations with Russia."

That comment follows a British claim that the Kremlin is seeking to replace Ukraine's government with a pro-Moscow administration — an allegation Russia denied.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Diplomat: Russia invasion by mid-Feb
SOURCE	https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220126-every-indication-putin-plans-force-by-mid-february-us
GIST	<p>Washington (AFP) – The United States believes that Russian President Vladimir Putin remains poised to use force against Ukraine by mid-February despite a pressure campaign to stop him, a top diplomat said Wednesday.</p> <p>"I have no idea whether he's made the ultimate decision, but we certainly see every indication that he is going to use military force sometime perhaps (between) now and the middle of February," Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman told a forum.</p> <p>Sherman, who met with her Russian counterpart earlier this month in Vienna in an attempt to warn Moscow against invading its neighbor, said that Putin's planning may be affected by the Winter Games in Beijing, which the United States and several allies are boycotting due to human rights concerns.</p> <p>"We all are aware that the Beijing Olympics begin on February 4, the opening ceremony, and President Putin expects to be there," Sherman told the Yalta European Strategy forum.</p> <p>"I think that probably President Xi Jinping would not be ecstatic if Putin chose that moment to invade Ukraine, so that may affect his timing and his thinking."</p> <p>Sherman said that the United States was "pushing for diplomacy" but also "preparing for the worst."</p>

	<p>She reiterated that "even one Russian troop further invading Ukraine is a very serious matter" -- a continued message from Washington after President Joe Biden raised eyebrows by speaking of a different European response to a "minor" incursion.</p> <p>But she said the United States was "preparing for all kinds of scenarios," from a "full-on invasion" to "hybrid attacks or subversion or sabotage or coercion."</p> <p>Any invasion "has tremendous consequences for Ukraine and Europe, but also sends a message to the entire world that other autocrats can act with such impunity and go past long-held international principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity and an ability of a country to choose its own alliances."</p> <p>Russia late last year amassed tens of thousands of troops near the border with Ukraine, where a pro-Moscow insurgency has killed more than 13,000 people since 2014.</p> <p>Russia, while denying plans for an invasion, has demanded concessions from the United States including a guarantee that Ukraine will never enter NATO.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 UK study: 66% omicron cases reinfections
SOURCE	https://nypost.com/2022/01/26/over-66-percent-of-omicron-cases-are-reinfections-study/
GIST	<p>More than two-thirds of cases of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 are among people who have been reinfected with the virus, a new study said Wednesday.</p> <p>Imperial College London researchers reported that around 3,582 people — or about 66% of participants in the study — who tested positive in January had already been infected with the virus, CNBC reported.</p> <p>An additional 7.5% of the infected participants said they believed they had previously had the virus but did not confirm that with a test.</p> <p>The study looked at more than 100,000 PCR tests that were collected across England between Jan. 5 and Jan. 20.</p> <p>The study's authors said in a paper released Wednesday that the Omicron variant has hit England at "unprecedented levels" and has nearly replaced Delta as the country's most prominent variant, CNBC reported.</p> <p>The study comes as officials announced that mask-wearing will no longer be mandated and the public will no longer be advised to work from home as of Thursday in England.</p> <p>Health officials said last month that roughly half of the Omicron cases in the UK were among the fully vaccinated.</p> <p>Almost 85% of the country's eligible population is fully vaccinated and 64% have gotten a booster shot, CNBC reported.</p> <p>In December, UK health officials also estimated that the risk of reinfection with the Omicron variant was about 5.4 times greater than with Delta.</p> <p>Omicron is a mutated version of COVID-19 that has been identified in over 170 countries, CNBC reported. World Health Organization officials reported Monday that since the variant was identified nine weeks ago, over 80 million virus cases have been reported to the agency.</p> <p>The UK reported 94,326 new COVID-19 cases on Tuesday, CNBC reported. Infection totals peaked in late December when 246,415 positive tests were recorded in one day.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Favorite foods to get more expensive
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/26/business/oscar-mayer-hot-dogs-velveeta-cheese-kraft-heinz/index.html
GIST	<p>New York (CNN Business)The makers of top food and consumer goods brands plan to raise prices in the spring, dashing shoppers' hopes for a quick drop in their grocery bills.</p> <p>Kraft Heinz said in a recent letter to its customers that it will raise prices in March on dozens of products, including Oscar Mayer cold cuts, hot dogs, sausages, bacon, Velveeta cheese, Maxwell House coffee, TGIF frozen chicken wings, Kool-Aid and Capri Sun drinks.</p> <p>The increases range from 6.6% on 12oz Velveeta Fresh Packs to 30% on a three-pack of Oscar Mayer turkey bacon. Most cold cuts and beef hot dogs will go up around 10% and coffee around 5%. Some Kool-Aid and Capri Sun drink packs will increase by about 20%.</p> <p>"As we enter 2022, inflation continues to dramatically impact the economy," Kraft Heinz said in a letter dated January 24 to at least one of its wholesale customers that was viewed by CNN Business. The wholesaler shared the letter on the condition of anonymity to protect the company's relationship with its suppliers.</p> <p>Kraft Heinz is the latest consumer manufacturer to announce plans to boost prices early in the year. Last week, Procter & Gamble said that it was raising prices for its retail customers by an average of about 8% in February on Tide and Gain laundry detergents, Downy fabric softener and Bounce dryer sheets. Conagra, which makes such brands as Slim Jim, Marie Callender's and Birds Eye, recently said it will raise prices later this year as well.</p> <p>If retailers decide to pass on any of the increased costs, these items will be more expensive for shoppers in stores. US consumer prices rose 7% annually in December, the steepest climb in 39 years.</p> <p>Kraft Heinz has already raised prices on some of these same foods in recent months.</p> <p>In October, the company said it would increase prices on Oscar Mayer cold cuts and hot dogs. In November, it said prices on Oscar Mayer beef, lean beef and Angus hot dogs, cheese dogs and other products would go up by around 9%.</p> <p>But since those November hikes, Kraft Heinz said in the letter, it has faced "constrained supply, logistic bottlenecks and weather-driven crop losses." The company's costs have increased, including on raw ingredients and freight, leading it to bump prices yet again.</p> <p>The US producer price index, a gauge for prices manufacturers are paying, rose 9.7% annually in December.</p> <p>A Kraft Heinz spokesperson said the company was raising prices on the products experiencing the greatest cost pressures, adding that "pricing is not the only thing we're doing to combat inflation."</p> <p>The company is adding larger package sizes and more affordable price points on some items, the spokesperson said.</p> <p>Higher prices for groceries are putting pressure on many Americans' household budgets, forcing some to change how they shop for food and essentials.</p> <p>Some shoppers are responding by trimming the number of products they're buying and trading down to less-expensive, private-label brands, according to businesses, market data, public surveys and interviews with customers. Others are switching to cheaper stores.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Trade deficit in goods top \$1T for first time
SOURCE	https://www.marketwatch.com/story/u-s-trade-deficit-in-goods-top-1-trillion-in-2021-for-first-time-ever-11643205222
GIST	<p>The numbers: The U.S. trade deficit in goods topped \$1 trillion in 2021 for the first time ever, as an economic recovery enabled Americans to snap up a record amount of imports such as toys, cell phones and appliances.</p> <p>For all of 2021, the trade gap in goods rose to \$1.08 trillion from \$893.5 billion in the prior year. The deficit in 2020 had also been a record high.</p> <p>The deficit in goods increased 3% in December to \$101 billion from \$98 billion, according to an advanced government estimate. It was the biggest monthly increase on record.</p> <p>Big picture: The speedy rebound in the U.S. economy compared to most other countries — fueled by massive government stimulus — helps explain the record trade deficit. Americans could afford to buy more foreign-made goods, and they did.</p> <p>Demand for U.S. exports was slower to bounce back because other countries lagged behind in their economic recoveries.</p> <p>The deficit is expected to subside once other countries catch up, but the U.S. has run large trade gaps for years and there doesn't appear to be any end in sight.</p> <p>Key details: U.S. imports advanced 2% in December to \$258.2 billion.</p> <p>Exports edged up 1.4% to \$157.3 billion.</p> <p>The overall trade deficit in 2021 is expected to fall short of \$1 trillion since the U.S. regularly runs a surplus in services such as tourism and travel. The total gap is likely to be just under \$800 billion.</p> <p>More details will be released next week when the government publishes the full December report on the U.S. trade balance.</p> <p>Also in the trade report, the government said advanced retail inventories jumped 4.4% in December. Wholesale inventories increased 2.1%, preliminary data show.</p> <p>Businesses have been trying to boost production to keep up with strong customer demand, but they've been dogged by persistent labor and supply shortages.</p> <p>Looking ahead: "The omicron variant threatens to fuel an even wider deficit in as virus concerns weigh on global growth and tourism, putting downward pressure on US exports, while domestic goods demand stays robust," said U.S. economist Mahir Rasheed of Oxford Economics.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Denmark ends most Covid restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.newsweek.com/denmark-end-most-covid-restrictions-welcome-life-we-knew-before-1673373
GIST	<p>Denmark Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced on January 26 Denmark would be throwing out most of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions it placed, including mask mandates.</p> <p>Restrictions currently in place are for the public to wear masks on public transportations, in restaurants, in shops, and people entering healthcare facilities and retirement homes, according to the Associated Press. However, following the February 1 change of restrictions, masks will only be required in hospitals, healthcare facilities and homes for the elderly.</p>

"We say goodbye to the restrictions and welcome the life we knew before," Frederiksen said. "As of Feb. 1, Denmark will be open."

According to Health Minister Magnus Heunicke, Denmark's recent cases of COVID were more than 46,000 daily on average; however, only 40 people are in hospital intensive care units.

"We continue with a strong epidemic surveillance," Heunicke said according to the AP. "Then we...can react quickly if necessary."

Despite lift of restrictions, Frederiksen warned there could be a rise in infections, which may lead to a fourth vaccination shot being necessary.

"It may seem strange that we want to remove restrictions given the high infection rates," Frederiksen said. "But fewer people become seriously ill."

Denmark was one of the first European counties in 2020 to close schools and send employees home due to the pandemic.

Sweden extended their restrictions on January 20 for the next two weeks, while Austria, according to [ABC News](#), is introducing a new mandate to take place on February 1. They have ordered bars, cafes and restaurants to close at 11 p.m., as well as advised workers to work from home when possible, according to the AP.

Austria's new vaccine mandate is being put into effect on February 1 due to low vaccination rates, according to ABC News. They reported that in mid-March, police will start checking vaccination statuses during routine checks. If a resident cannot produce written proof of vaccination, they face a fine of up to 600 Euros (\$685). Exceptions are made for pregnant women and those who cannot receive the vaccine due to medical reasons, as well as those who recovered from the virus in the last six months.

According to Reuters, Finland is going to begin to ease its restrictions in mid-February.

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HEADLINE	01/27 Russia signals resolve key NATO demand
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/27/ukraine-russia-us-nato-putin/
GIST	<p>MOSCOW — A top Russian official warned Thursday that international tensions would be “seriously complicated” if the United States and NATO did not meet the Kremlin’s demand to bar Ukraine from joining the alliance, amid intensifying fears of a new Russian attack on its eastern neighbor.</p> <p>Former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, now deputy chair of the Russian Security Council, said no one was looking for war but that “we have practically exhausted the limits of retreat,” referring to NATO’s expansion into Eastern Europe from 1997. “They are now encroaching on our state borders.”</p> <p>Senior Russian officials have not yet commented on written proposals by Washington and NATO, delivered late Wednesday, that spelled out their response to Moscow’s sweeping demands, including its ultimatum that the Western military alliance withdraw forces and equipment from former Soviet and Warsaw Pact countries. Ukraine is not a NATO member but the West has ramped up security cooperation with the country in recent years.</p> <p>Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia would not delay its response to the proposals but that it would be foolish to expect it the next day.</p> <p>Moscow has massed more than 100,000 troops and equipment near Ukraine, raising tensions and launching simultaneous military exercises. U.S. officials have warned that a Russian attack could come at “any time” and ordered diplomatic families to leave Kyiv.</p>

The Kremlin denies plans to attack and has accused NATO of aggression. But the alliance's proposals offer a final hope to de-escalate the crisis after recent diplomatic meetings in Europe failed to reach a breakthrough. The written response, coordinated with Ukraine, set "out a serious diplomatic path forward, should Russia choose it," Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters Wednesday.

The Western alliance has ruled out Moscow's key demand for an end to NATO's "open door policy" and any future expansion of the bloc. Instead, the United States put forward missile deployment and arms control as potential areas of negotiation and compromise, but Medvedev said that such dialogue was unlikely if the West did not accept Russian demands.

Medvedev warned that Russia also wants guarantees that the United States or other countries would never send offensive weapons to Ukraine. "Ukraine, unfortunately, has now turned ... into a toy in the hands of NATO and, above all, in the hands of the United States ... [and is] used as an instrument of geopolitical pressure on Russia," he said, adding that President Vladimir Putin would decide on Russian action.

Even as diplomacy continues, the United States and some European allies are ramping up preparations for a renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine. British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace told the British Broadcasting Corp. that he is not optimistic about the chances of achieving a diplomatic breakthrough and averting a Russian invasion, although he said there is still "a chance."

U.S. and NATO officials have expressed alarm over a buildup of Russian troops in Belarus, north of Ukraine, ahead of major military exercises next month. The chief of the Belarusian armed forces' General Staff, Viktor Gulevich, said Thursday that Russian forces would leave the Moscow-aligned country once the exercise is over.

Amid the tension, Ukraine's Interior Ministry said early Thursday that five people were killed and another five were injured in a shooting by a National Guard service member in the city of Dnipro. The gunman was detained after he fled the scene carrying a weapon. Officials [said](#) in a statement that the motive for the shooting is not yet known.

U.S. officials are working with countries and companies around the world to shore up alternative energy supplies to Europe, which relies on Russian natural gas exports, in the event that Moscow responds to potential sanctions by [cutting off supplies](#). The White House has acknowledged that there are limits to any contingency measures, as the industry grapples with logistical issues and capacity constraints.

"No question there are logistical challenges, especially moving natural gas. That's part of our discussion with a lot of these companies and countries," White House press secretary Jen Psaki [told reporters](#) Wednesday. "But again, these conversations are ongoing, and we don't intend to fail on them."

The debate over how to restrain Russian aggression has been complicated by the fact that some European countries, particularly those with closer ties to Moscow, have been reluctant to confront the Kremlin too directly. As Washington tries to shield its allies from possible Russian retaliation, Wallace, the British defense secretary, is in Europe canvassing support for sanctions. He is also set to travel to Russia in the coming days for talks with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Shoigu.

Berlin became the subject of scorn in Kyiv after saying it would supply 5,000 military helmets to help with Ukraine's self-defense — as the United States and other NATO members send lethal weapons, including tons of arms and antitank missiles.

"The behavior of the German government leaves me speechless," Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko told the German tabloid Bild. "What kind of support will Germany send next, pillows?"

Though officials have not detailed potential punitive measures against Moscow, a controversial target would be the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which will carry natural gas from Russia to Germany when it is activated. Many European allies oppose the pipeline, which deepens Berlin's reliance on Moscow.

Beijing has signaled support for Moscow, with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi telling Blinken in a phone call that all sides should avoid “hyping or exaggerating the circumstances of the crisis.” The security of one country “cannot come at the cost of harming another country’s security, and regional security cannot be ensured by strengthening, or even expanding, a military bloc,” he said, according to a readout.

Moscow, meanwhile, appears eager to exploit any potential gaps between Washington and its allies. Putin on Wednesday met via videoconference with the leaders of some of Italy’s most influential companies to discuss economic ties, a meeting that Rome had tried to prevent. The event was a show of Russia’s economic leverage — and the two-sided pain that would result in the event of sanctions.

The tense situation in Ukraine also is exacerbating internal divisions in the United States, where Republican leaders are attacking President Biden for what they describe as a weak response to Russian aggression. Others in the party’s right wing, including Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) and Ohio Senate candidate J.D. Vance, are questioning why the country is getting involved in Ukraine at all.

In Ukraine, many residents are preparing for a return to the violence and unrest of 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea. If a diplomatic solution fails, they are hoping for solidarity from other European nations.

“If terrible things may happen, I just want the whole world to support us, and to be aware, to accept us if we ask them,” said Alena Krichko, who lives with her two children in Kharkiv, the country’s second-largest city, which sits less than 30 miles from the Russian border.

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HEADLINE	01/27 Conspiracy theorists flock to Substack
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/01/27/substack-misinformation-anti-vaccine/
GIST	<p>Dr. Joseph Mercola, a leading anti-vaccine advocate whose screeds have been restricted by YouTube and Facebook, this month warned that the unvaccinated might soon be imprisoned in government-run camps. The week before, he circulated a study purporting to use government data to prove that more children had died from covid shots than from the coronavirus itself.</p> <p>Shut down by major social media platforms, Mercola has found a new way to spread these debunked claims: on Substack, the subscription-based newsletter platform that is increasingly a hub for controversial and often misleading perspectives about the coronavirus.</p> <p>Substack, which researchers from the nonprofit Center for Countering Digital Hate say makes millions of dollars off anti-vaccine misinformation, on Wednesday defended its tolerance for publishing “writers with whom we strongly disagree.”</p> <p>Prominent figures known for spreading misinformation, such as Mercola, have flocked to Substack, podcasting platforms and a growing number of right-wing social media networks over the past year after getting kicked off or restricted on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.</p> <p>Now these alternative platforms are beginning to face some of the scrutiny that has imperiled social media services. But there’s a fundamental difference in the architecture of newsletters and podcasts when compared to that of social media companies. Social networks use algorithms to spread content — sometimes misinformation — to users who don’t want to see it. Newsletters and podcasts don’t.</p> <p>These newer platforms cater to subscribers who seek out specific content that accommodates their viewpoints — potentially making the services less responsible for spreading harmful views, some misinformation experts say. At the same time, the platforms are exposing tens of thousands of people to misinformation each month — content that can potentially lead people to engage in behaviors that endanger themselves and others.</p>

Earlier this month, 250 doctors and scientists wrote an open letter to the music streaming platform Spotify asking the company to drop host and comedian Joe Rogan — one of its most popular podcasters — for discussing conspiracy theories about vaccines. Neil Young asked the company to remove his music in protest this week, saying [in a letter](#) that Spotify “can have Rogan or Young. But not both.” (Spotify dropped Young on Wednesday). Former Trump adviser Stephen K. Bannon, who was booted from Spotify in 2020, used [his popular podcast](#), available on multiple platforms, to disseminate violent rhetoric and false claims about the election in the weeks leading up to the Capitol siege on Jan. 6.

Substack, which was founded in San Francisco in 2017, is part of a growing crop of subscription-based services whose mission is to help creators, authors and other influencers get paid for building more intimate relationships with devoted audiences. Readers pay per month to subscribe to a certain author, and the author keeps 90 percent of the revenue, while Substack takes 10 percent. The subscription model has become so popular that Twitter recently launched a subscription service and Facebook has outlined plans for paid subscription-based newsletters for authors and creators.

Mercola has been [banned from](#) YouTube, and his content has been restricted on Facebook. He uses his remaining public channels — like Twitter — to direct people to a “Censored Library” of articles he publishes in his newsletter, which is one of the top 10 most popular on Substack.

Mercola did not respond to a request for comment.

This type of content is “so bad no one else will host it,” said Imran Ahmed, CEO of the Center for Countering Digital Hate, a nonprofit that focuses on combating misinformation and has researched Substack. By splitting subscription profits with creators, the group estimates, Substack earns at least \$2.5 million a year from just five anti-vaccine leaders who have amassed tens of thousands of subscribers, each paying \$50 a month.

Substack declined to comment, but shortly after The Washington Post made inquiries, CEO Chris Best and his two co-founders published a blog post saying that putting up with “the presence of writers with whom we strongly disagree” was a “necessary precondition for creating more trust in the information ecosystem as a whole.”

“The more that powerful institutions attempt to control what can and cannot be said in public, the more people there will be who are ready to create alternative narratives about what’s ‘true,’ spurred by a belief that there’s a conspiracy to suppress important information,” they wrote.

Facebook groups and other closed forums have long been plagued with misinformation because they are essentially echo chambers in which users share similar viewpoints, experts say, and newsletters face similar problems. They can make like-minded people more radicalized in their beliefs. And a popular newsletter can be picked up and amplified by other outlets, as well as forwarded to others.

Early on, social media companies took a hands-off approach to policing content. Only posts directly advocating violence or lawbreaking were removed. But Silicon Valley firms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have changed their approach over the past four years in response to controversies, including the use of their services for online bullying and sowing disinformation. They have crafted policies that police many forms of harmful material, including banning misinformation about the coronavirus, and have hired small armies of moderators who scan content and delete what breaks the rules. They also work with fact-checkers that help the companies label content that is inaccurate.

The rules social media companies have designed for advertising are even stricter because companies do not want to be perceived as profiting off hate and other social ills.

Still, misinformation creeps through and proliferates.

Substack, by contrast, is operating under standards that resemble those of social media companies in their early days. Chief executive Best said he wants to build a platform for “questioning conventional wisdom,”

where “dissent is allowed.” He said he disagrees with the way social media companies have been pushed into becoming “censorship police.”

Best has even made a point of contrasting his business model with that of social media companies, saying the purpose of firms like Substack is to let people “take back” their minds from their social media feeds, which he refers to as “amplification machines.”

Substack’s limited content guidelines say the company bans “harmful content” but don’t specify except to say that this includes “material that advocates, threatens, or shows you causing harm to yourself, other people, or animals.” The company did not respond to questions about how the rules are being enforced, other than to say it maintains a hands-off approach.

Joan Donovan, research director of the Technology and Social Change Project at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, said the attitude of companies like Substack was only going to invite further scrutiny.

“Openness is easily exploited, so a lack of policy means the brand’s reputation will be dragged anytime there is a major scandal,” she said. “Substack’s brand will be tied to its most controversial creators. Clear policy will ensure they can enforce their terms early on before a creator has caused so much damage that it’s impossible to separate bad actors from a bad product.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said approved coronavirus vaccines are effective in preventing covid hospitalizations and deaths. Mercola’s claim that they’ve killed more children than covid has been debunked by PolitiFact, which cited the CDC as saying there is no clear evidence that the vaccines have caused any deaths. The claim about potentially putting the unvaccinated in prison camps is a misleading reference to a New York bill from 2015 that relates to Ebola, not the coronavirus, according to Reuters.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate calculated its minimum profit figure for Substack by looking at five authors who are known anti-vaccine advocates or have expressed skeptical opinions about vaccines.

Substack does not publish exact subscriber numbers but says whether authors count subscribers in the thousands and tens of thousands. The CCDH took those rough subscriber numbers and calculated their monthly profits by using low-end estimates for how much revenue is generated per subscriber. It then calculated Substack’s revenue using the 90-10 split, with 90 percent of revenue going to the author and 10 percent to Substack.

“Substack should immediately stop profiting from medical misinformation that can seriously harm readers,” said Ahmed, the CCDH chief.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Use federal grants protect election workers
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/01/26/justice-grants-election-workers/
GIST	<p>The Justice Department on Wednesday told states they could spend federal law-enforcement grant money on protection for election workers, who have faced a plethora of threats in the aftermath of the 2020 election.</p> <p>In a letter Wednesday, Kristen Mahoney, acting director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, told state officials administering a law-enforcement grant program that they could use the funds “to deter, detect, and protect against threats of violence against election workers, administrators, officials, and others associated with the electoral process.”</p> <p>Top officials also discussed the possibility in a meeting with election officials and workers, who have pressed the Justice Department to do more to provide for their safety and investigate and prosecute those making threats.</p>

Last week, the Justice Department’s election threats task force [brought its first criminal case against a Texas man](#) accused of threatening election and other government workers in Georgia. Those included Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger (R), according to people familiar with the investigation who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss details not included in the indictment. The head of the Justice Department’s criminal division said at the time the task force has received more than 850 referrals of potentially harassing and offensive statements, resulting in dozens of open investigations or efforts to mitigate danger.

How much federal cash will get spent on deterring threats to election workers is unclear. The funds at issue come from the Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant Program, which gives state and local jurisdictions various amounts of money for public safety endeavors, based on the states’ population and violent crime rate. In 2021, for example, Arizona received more than \$4 million, while Michigan received about \$5.8 million.

An agency or person is designated in each state to determine how the money is spent — though the Justice Department’s guidance gives a hint of federal officials’ priorities. In her [own letter](#) to state administering agency directors, Vanita Gupta, the Justice Department’s associate attorney general, noted that “the past year has seen an unprecedented increase in threats of violence against Americans who administer the election process in our country.”

“The Department of Justice is committed to protecting every American’s right to vote, including by protecting election workers against personal threats of violence that aim to undermine the electoral process,” Gupta wrote.

Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson (D), who had armed demonstrators gather outside her home in December, said, “My immediate reaction to this is relief — in a time when local and state election officials are facing continued and escalating threats and harassment, it is a relief to know the Department of Justice is prioritizing investing in our safety and security, which is critical to ensuring our elections are safe and secure. The allocation should also help improve communication and collaboration between law enforcement and election officials, and removes from us the perpetual anxiety of trying to figure out how to fund needed security and protections.”

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HEADLINE	01/26 Tacoma, Bellevue speedskaters Olympics
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/culture/2022/01/tacoma-and-bellevue-speedskaters-head-beijing-winter-olympics
GIST	<p>From Apolo Ohno to J.R. Celski to Aaron Tran, the Puget Sound region has become known for short track speedskating athletes who take their ice rink talent all the way to the Olympics. This year, Corinne Stoddard and Eunice Lee — hailing from Tacoma and Bellevue — will continue that tradition: The local athletes, 20 and 17 years old, respectively, are heading to the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, China.</p> <p>Figure skating tends to get the most buzz at the Winter Games, but short track speedskating, an Olympic sport since 1992, is prime spectacle. From the firing of the starting gun, the race is nonstop, nail-biting action, with competitors traveling at speeds of more than 30 miles an hour on slick ice.</p> <p>Short track skaters lean almost parallel to the oval track as they take the turns, moving in tight packs just inches from their rivals’ skate blades. They circle a 111.12-meter course, much more compact than the 400-meter tracks used in long-track speedskating, which is practiced on a larger rink and became an Olympic sport decades before short track. The competition is so close that, until the tip of the first blade breaches the finish line, anything can happen — including careening into the safety barriers — and even a small mistake can be career-ending.</p> <p>“I’m addicted to the adrenaline,” says Stoddard, who hails from Tacoma. Like eight-time medalist Ohno, Stoddard came to short track from inline roller skating, and like many other successful speedskaters, she learned the ropes at Pattison’s West roller skating center in Federal Way. Lee, who is 17 and attends (virtual) school in Bellevue, originally started as a figure skater and gymnast in South Korea and began</p>

	<p>speedskating when she moved to the Puget Sound region at age 6. The two are the first female speedskaters from the Pacific Northwest to reach the Olympics in years.</p> <p>Stoddard is slated to compete in all the women's races: the 500, 1,000 and 1,500 meters, as well as the relay, and possibly also the mixed-gender 2,000-meter relay, which is new at the Olympics this year. Lee qualified for the team as the fifth person on the four-person relay team, meaning she is there as an alternate. Whether she will take the ice will depend on whether someone else on the team gets injured or sick, or if her coaches decide to put her on for another reason. If she ends up competing, she'll be the youngest U.S. short track skater to compete at the Olympics since 1998.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Ukraine: Russia behind spate bomb threats
SOURCE	https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20220126-ukraine-russian-hand-behind-spate-of-bomb-scares-at-schools-nationwide
GIST	<p>Shortly after noon on January 24, thousands of teachers and students at the schools of this city of some 285,000 people were hastily evacuated in the wake of an anonymous bomb threat.</p> <p>The children at one downtown preschool were napping when the alarm was sounded.</p> <p>“We got the report and rushed all the children and employees out of the building,” Viktoria Oleksiyenko, director of preschool No. 26, told RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service. “It took about six minutes to get all the children out. They had been sleeping, and we quickly got them dressed and outside. Then we called all the parents, and they came to pick up their children.”</p> <p>Similar scenes played out across the city, which is located less than 100 kilometers from Ukraine's border with Russia.</p> <p>“I was really afraid,” a local retiree who asked to be identified only as Paraskeva said. “I heard later on television that it was a false alarm, but when I went out on the street and saw hundreds of children out there... What were they doing? I didn't know. I asked my neighbor, who was also standing there all afraid. She didn't know anything.”</p> <p>‘Imagining The Worst’</p> <p>“I ran out for my child and almost fell down,” said another Chernihiv resident, who asked to be identified only as Tetyana. “It was terrifying. The teacher called and said I had to come immediately to get my child. She didn't explain anything, and my mind started imagining the worst.”</p> <p>As tensions mount between Ukraine and Russia amid an alarming buildup of Russian forces near the border, Ukraine's schoolchildren, their families, and their communities have already found themselves on the front line of what Kyiv's intelligence service, the SBU, describes as a “hybrid war.”</p> <p>In 2021, according to the SBU, there were just over 1,100 false bomb threats leveled against schools nationwide. In the first three weeks of 2022, the country has already seen more than 300, targeting schools in almost every city in the country of 44 million.</p> <p>The spate of false alarms is an operation by Russia's intelligence services, the SBU asserted in a report issued on January 21, saying that most of the threats have been traced to sources inside Russia or in the parts of eastern Ukraine that are held by Moscow-backed separatists. A small number of the threats have apparently been made by copycat pranksters inside Ukraine, the service added.</p> <p>“The goal of the special services of the aggressor country is clear,” the SBU report stated. “To place additional pressure on Ukraine and to sow alarm and panic among the public. Unfortunately, such informational-psychological special operations are the reality of modern hybrid wars, and we have to face that.”</p>

In addition to schools, government agencies, courts, railway stations, airports, and other key infrastructure elements have been targeted, using sophisticated software aimed at masking the source of the threats.

Scare Tactics?

On January 25, all 20 schools in Sloviansk, a city of some 100,000 people in the Donetsk region that in 2014 was briefly held by Russia-backed separatists at the start of their war against Kyiv but is now under government control, were also evacuated because of a bomb threat that turned out to be fake.

“There was absolutely no panic among the teachers,” Svitlana Deleske, director of school No. 8 where 300 students were evacuated, told RFE/RL. “Everyone acted harmoniously, efficiently. Such things happen to us from time to time. For the children, however, it was unusual. Two little girls were in tears, and the homeroom teacher and I had to take them by the hand.”

Four hours after the false report came in, about one-third of the city’s 20 schools had been searched and cleared for reentry, the head of the city’s Education Department, Marina Khokhlova said.

Such false alarms have become a significant disruption for schools, administrators say. In addition, they place a considerable burden on police, the Emergency Situations Ministry, and other state agencies.

Many of the central schools in Chernihiv are located on major streets, and some of them have more than 1,000 students. When the false alarm came on January 24, schools were forced to set up perimeters, in many cases blocking streets and tying up transportation while security forces swept the buildings.

The United States, Ukraine, and other governments say Russia has amassed 100,000 or more troops near Ukraine’s borders and is preparing for a possible new invasion. The Kremlin denies any intentions to invade its neighbor but has suggested that de-escalation is conditional on binding guarantees that NATO will never expand further eastward, especially to Ukraine, among other things.

Despite compelling evidence, Moscow denies providing military support to separatists who hold parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces in the eastern region known as the Donbas. The ongoing war between the Russia-backed forces and Ukraine’s government has killed more than 13,200 people since 2014.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Japan’s favorite snack first-ever price hike
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/27/japans-favourite-snack-falls-victim-to-global-inflation-with-first-ever-price-hike
GIST	<p>One of Japan’s best-loved snacks is to go up in price – by a whopping 20% – for the first time since its launch more than four decades ago,</p> <p>But Umaibo – literally “delicious stick” – will still be a steal for schoolchildren at just ¥12 apiece (US10c, not including sales tax), up from the current ¥10, when the change goes into effect in April.</p> <p>The crunchy corn snack’s producer, Yaokin, blamed the rising price of corn imported from the US for the hike, the first since Umaibo went on sale in 1979.</p> <p>Although the figures involved are tiny, the increase – less than 2c – is symbolically significant in “inflation-resistant” Japan, where firms have been reluctant to pass rising raw material costs on to consumers.</p> <p>Noriko Eda, a 59-year-old Tokyo resident, said she was “surprised” by the news. “Umaibo have been the same price for so long, so a ¥2 increase is a big deal.”</p> <p>A fellow Tokyoite, Naomi Hosaka, said it was a “bit sad” that the impact of inflationary trends in the global economy were affecting the cheapest items, including children’s treats.</p>

The cylindrical snacks, wrapped in aluminium film, come in more than a dozen flavours, many based on [Japanese food](#), such as spicy cod roe and takoyaki octopus balls, with cream of corn soup the biggest seller.

Around 700m of the sticks are sold annually – the equivalent of about five and a half for each person – both in packs and individually.

Umaibo's low price and colourful wrappers featuring its hyperactive mascot [Umaemon](#) have earned the snacks a special place in the affections of schoolchildren looking to make their pocket money go as far as possible, and among older people craving a fix of sweet-shop nostalgia.

In the past, Japanese companies have countered rising costs by shrinking packages – Umaibo lost a single gram in weight in 2007 – but price increases could become a more regular occurrence.

“There's nothing we can do,” said Takeshi Nemoto, a buyer for a Tokyo snack shop. “From the manufacturer's point of view, they can't stay profitable unless they raise the price.”

Celebrity fans mourned the looming demise of the ¥10 price tag and, possibly, the loss of Umaibo's status as Japan's “national snack”.

“We're witnessing a turning point in history,” tweeted rock musician Atsushi Osawa, whose band, Uchikubi Gokumon Doukukai, referenced the snack and its “miracle” price in a [2010 song](#). “The price has started to diverge from the lyrics,” he said.

Umaibo's roots can be traced to central Japan, where the grandparents of Yaokin's current president, Masahiko Sumiya, started selling shrimp crackers at their fruit and vegetable shop. His father founded the company in 1960 when he moved to Tokyo after the second world war, according to the Mainichi newspaper.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Cleared: homeless camp near Super Bowl
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/26/homeless-los-angeles-super-bowl
GIST	<p>Officials in Los Angeles have cleared a homeless encampment near SoFi stadium, where the Super Bowl will take place in three weeks, drawing backlash from human rights groups and the unhoused residents who have been displaced.</p> <p>On Monday and Tuesday, the state transit agency Caltrans shut down the tent community, which visitors would probably have passed on their way to the big game, calling it a “safety issue”.</p> <p>But some have accused authorities of forcing people out of sight without providing housing or services.</p> <p>“They are just trying to survive,” said Sofi Villalpando, who works with some of the displaced residents. “It feels like [authorities] are removing people so they won’t be seen.”</p> <p>Dawn Toftee, 57, who was living at the encampment that was cleared, told the Guardian on Wednesday that she lost the couch she had been sleeping on during the sweep and was now sleeping on a blanket on a nearby street where she felt less safe. “Now I’m at this site where I didn’t want to be. There’s been killings and shootings around here ... They should let us have our home back.”</p> <p>Toftee said another unhoused resident, who uses a wheelchair, had also lost the mattress he’d been sleeping on during the cleanup. She blamed the Super Bowl: “It’s terrible and it’s bullshit.”</p> <p>The controversial sweep comes as elected officials in LA have increasingly launched high-profile encampment shutdowns in response to a worsening humanitarian crisis. There were an estimated 48,000 people living on the streets in LA county at the start of the pandemic, the latest count. The strategy</p>

of sweeps, critics say, has prioritized aesthetics and the complaints of neighbors, leading people in established tent communities to be scattered into more dangerous living conditions.

It also comes as the region is dealing with major Covid outbreaks in homeless shelters [across the county](#), further limiting unhoused people's options.

It's unclear how many people were affected by this week's sweep and whether anyone received housing, shelter or other services. Michael Comeaux, a Caltrans spokesperson, directed the Guardian to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (Lahsa), the county service provider that partnered with Caltrans for "outreach and support".

A Lahsa spokesperson said that the agency had talked to eight encampment residents on Tuesday, but he did not confirm whether any were successfully placed into housing.

Comeaux said Caltrans had brought "personal belongings left behind" to a nearby maintenance yard where they would be stored for a few weeks, and that the agency had posted notices about the "cleanup" 72 hours in advance. Comeaux said that if a couch or mattress looked to be in "unusable condition", the crew would dispose of it.

Madeline deVillers, another advocate working with the residents, said Caltrans had showed up hours earlier than some residents had expected and that she had witnessed people's belongings being thrown out. She estimated that more than two dozen people had been displaced by the sweep and said she did not personally know of anyone who received any form of housing or shelter. Most people were camping around nearby streets, she said.

"There are community bonds out here – people help each other," she said. "If I give out certain supplies, they get passed on through other people. So having this loss of community really takes a lot of resources from people ... and is really hard and dangerous for these folks."

While Caltrans has said a "fire safety" concern was driving the cleanup, advocates questioned why the whole camp had to be closed. And a worker on site [told the local station KTLA](#) that the Super Bowl was the impetus for the sweep.

"No one wants to take responsibility for what is happening," said Annie Powers, an organizer with NOlympics LA, a [coalition](#) that has organized against the Olympics in 2028 in LA, partly out of concern that it will lead to these kinds of sweeps. "We see this time and time again – with sports capitalism, celebrations, or other big events like the Super Bowl or Olympics, the city tries to make the city look better for investors coming from out of town. So they're very encouraged to try to disappear the poor from the streets."

The residents there had a wide range of experiences that led them to the streets, Villalpando said, including some whose partners had died, resulting in a loss of financial stability, and others out of work due to injuries. Some had previously been displaced from another area that went through an encampment sweep: "It's such a broken system and I don't feel like there is any accountability."

Toftee, the displaced resident, said she did not mind officials cleaning up the area, but that she wished they could return to the site, where she said she had been camping for roughly two years.

"I am tired of being on the streets, and I don't want to die here," she said, noting that she had multiple unhoused friends who had died recently. A recent UCLA [report](#) estimated that 1,500 unhoused people died while living on the streets from March 2020 to July 2021. Toftee said she wished elected officials understood their experiences: "Why don't they come and spend a day or two out here, and see what we're going through?"

"I have nowhere to go," added Dawn Wilson, 49, another displaced resident, who said she wasn't offered housing and was now camping on a sidewalk with her dog. "They don't care what happens to us."

	NFL spokespeople did not immediately respond to an inquiry on Wednesday afternoon.
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HEADLINE	01/26 Study: vaccines reduce risk long-Covid
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jan/26/coronavirus-vaccines-may-reduce-risk-of-long-covid-ons-study-finds
GIST	<p>Vaccination could reduce the risk of long Covid, research by the Office for National Statistics suggests. The study, of more than 6,000 adults, found those who were double-vaccinated had a 41% lower likelihood of self-reporting Covid symptoms 12 weeks after first testing positive.</p> <p>Overall, 9.5% of the double-vaccinated group reported experiencing long Covid, defined as symptoms lasting more than four weeks, compared with 14.6% of a socio-demographically matched group who were unvaccinated.</p> <p>Dr David Strain, a clinical senior lecturer at the University of Exeter medical school and the British Medical Association's lead on long Covid, said the ONS findings fitted with research published this week that showed low levels of certain antibodies were more common in those who developed long Covid than in patients who swiftly recovered.</p> <p>"We know that the vaccines trigger these immune responses," he said. "If you approach a Covid infection with higher levels of these immunoglobulins, it's less likely to [become long Covid]." Strain added that it was reassuring that vaccination appeared to mitigate the risk of long Covid.</p> <p>A limitation of the study was that, because of the timing of the vaccination programme, the double-vaccinated participants were sampled at a later time point – 238 days on average – than those in the unvaccinated group. So changes in dominant Covid variants in circulation and other factors that varied over the course of the pandemic could have influenced the results.</p> <p>The study was also observational and, while the two groups were matched for age and other socio-economic factors, there may have been other differences between the groups, meaning the study could not conclusively prove that vaccination caused the different rates of illness.</p> <p>Separately, the ONS found that differences in death rates between people from different ethnic backgrounds have persisted since the start of the vaccination programme, with the rate of death involving Covid highest for the Bangladeshi group (five times greater than the white British group for males, and 4.5 greater for females), followed by the Pakistani group (3.1 for males, 2.6 for females) and black Africans (2.4 for males, 1.7 for females).</p> <p>In most cases, the different rates were explained by where people lived, social disadvantage, occupation, overall health and vaccination status. However, the Bangladeshi group and Pakistani men remained at higher risk than average even after adjusting for these factors. Previous research highlighted a gene, more common in south Asian populations, that could place this group at higher risk from Covid.</p> <p>Vahé Nafilyan, of the ONS, said: "Today's analysis shows that since the vaccination programme began, the risk of Covid-19 death has continued to be higher in most ethnic minority groups than in the white British group. For the first time, we show that the lower vaccination coverage in some ethnic groups also contributes to the elevated risk of Covid-19 death, particularly in the black African and black Caribbean groups."</p> <p>The latest data from the ONS, based on swabs collected from randomly selected households, suggests that Covid infection levels fell in England, Wales and Scotland last week, although the trend was unclear in Northern Ireland.</p>

	<p>The estimates suggest about 2,629,400 people, or about 1 in 20, in England had Covid in the week ending 22 January.</p> <p>The study also shows that while infection levels are falling in most age groups, they are rising in school-age children. Similar findings have been reported in other research, including the React-1 study, the latest results of which were released on Wednesday by Imperial College London.</p> <p>According to ONS figures for the week ending 22 January, the percentage of those testing positive for Covid increased in England among children between the age of two and school year 6, as well as for those in school year 7-11, with almost 12% of the former and more than 6% of the latter testing positive.</p> <p>While some scientists have called for renewed efforts to vaccinate adolescents and expand the programme to all children aged five and above, others have emphasised that Covid is generally a mild infection for the age group and that there is a tight risk-benefit involved.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/27 Report: demand for oil stymies climate goals
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jan/27/demand-fossil-fuels-climate-goals-oil-gas-prices-investors
GIST	<p>Global oil prices have climbed to \$90 a barrel, which could tempt investors to pile more cash into long-term fossil fuel projects, dashing the world's hopes to limit carbon emissions in line with climate targets and wasting billions in investment, according to a report.</p> <p>Recent price rises could mean more potential projects appear to be lucrative investments in the short-term, the report by the financial thinktank Carbon Tracker says. But the analysis suggests demand for fossil fuels could begin to dwindle by the time these projects begin, creating "a nightmare scenario" for investors and climate campaigners.</p> <p>Demand for oil and gas has rebounded strongly as the global economy bounces back from the economic slowdown triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, leading to a global gas supply crunch and rocketing energy market prices.</p> <p>The international oil price climbed from lows of about \$20 a barrel in April 2020 to seven-year highs of \$90 a barrel on Wednesday, and may reach \$100 by the end of the year. Meanwhile gas prices have reached all-time highs in markets across Europe and Asia, fuelling a cost of living crisis.</p> <p>But the increase was unlikely to last over the lifetime of a long-term fossil fuel investment, Carbon Tracker said, because government climate commitments combined with the rapid switch to electric vehicles and renewable energy would drive down demand for oil sharply from the late 2020s to 2040.</p> <p>"You can see the same over-investment story for gas," said Mike Coffin, the head of oil and gas at Carbon Tracker and a co-author of the report. He advised oil and gas companies and their investors to "resist the temptation" to make long-term investments in new fossil fuel projects based on current market prices.</p> <p>Axel Dalman, a Carbon Tracker analyst and the lead author of the report, said: "Companies may see high prices as a huge neon sign pointing towards investment in more supply. However, this could become a nightmare scenario if they go ahead with projects which deliver oil around the time that demand starts to decline."</p> <p>A failure to acknowledge "the sea change risks" facing fossil fuel developers from the global transition to low-carbon energy risked locking in carbon emissions, which would dash the Paris climate goals as well as investor returns, Coffin added.</p>

	<p>The warning follows a call this week from Fatih Birol, the executive director of the International Energy Agency, for governments to triple their investment in low-carbon energy sources over the next decade to cut their reliance on gas as a safeguard against a future energy market crisis.</p> <p>“The world has not been investing enough to meet its future energy needs – and that remains the case today. Clean energy investment is gradually picking up but remains far short of what is required to meet rising demand for energy services in a sustainable way,” he added.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 San Jose: gun owners liability insurance
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/26/california-san-jose-gun-owners-liability-insurance
GIST	<p>A California city has voted to require gun owners to carry liability insurance in what’s believed to be the first measure of its kind in the United States.</p> <p>The San Jose city council on Tuesday night overwhelmingly approved the measure despite opposition from gun owners who said it would violate their second amendment rights and promised to sue.</p> <p>The Silicon Valley city of about 1 million followed a trend of other Democratic-led cities that have sought to rein in violence through stricter rules. But while similar laws have been proposed, San Jose is the first city to pass one, according to Brady United, a national non-profit that advocates against gun violence.</p> <p>Council members, including several who had lost friends to gun violence, said it was a step toward dealing with gun violence that Councilman Sergio Jimenez called “a scourge on our society”.</p> <p>Having liability insurance would encourage people in the 55,000 households in San Jose who legally own at least one registered gun to have gun safes, install trigger locks and take gun safety classes, Mayor Sam Liccardo said.</p> <p>The liability insurance would cover losses or damages resulting from any accidental use of the firearm, including death, injury or property damage, according to the ordinance. If a gun is stolen or lost, the owner of the firearm would be considered liable until the theft or loss is reported to authorities.</p> <p>However, gun owners who do not have insurance will not lose their guns or face any criminal charges, the mayor said.</p> <p>The council also voted to require gun owners to pay an estimated \$25 fee, which would be collected by a yet-to-be-named non-profit and doled out to community groups to be used for firearm safety education and training, suicide prevention, and domestic violence and mental health services.</p> <p>The proposed ordinance is part of a broad gun control plan Liccardo announced following the 26 May mass shooting at the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority rail yard that left nine people dead, including the employee who opened fire on his colleagues then killed himself.</p> <p>At an hours-long meeting, critics argued that the fee and liability requirements violated their right to bear arms and would do nothing to stop gun crimes, including the use of untraceable, build-it-yourself “ghost guns”.</p> <p>“You cannot tax a constitutional right. This does nothing to reduce crime,” one speaker said.</p> <p>The measure did not address the huge problem of illegally obtained weapons that are stolen or purchased without background checks.</p> <p>Liccardo acknowledged those concerns. “This won’t stop mass shootings and keep bad people from committing violent crime,” the mayor said, but added most gun deaths nationally are from suicide, accidental shootings or other causes and even many homicides stem from domestic violence.</p>

	<p>Liccardo also said gun violence costs San Jose taxpayers \$40m a year in emergency response services. Some speakers argued that the law would face costly and lengthy court challenges.</p> <p>Before the vote, Sam Paredes, executive director of Gun Owners of California, said his group would sue if the proposal takes effect, calling it “totally unconstitutional in any configuration”.</p> <p>However, Liccardo said some attorneys had already offered to defend the city pro bono.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 L.A. bans new urban oil, gas drilling
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/26/los-angeles-vote-phase-out-oil-and-gas-drilling
GIST	<p>Though better known as the homeland of Hollywood, Los Angeles was built on oil. More than 5,200 oil and gas wells sprawl across the city, making it one of the largest urban oilfields in the country.</p> <p>But on Wednesday, the Los Angeles city council voted unanimously to phase out drilling in the city, a move environmental justice advocates have been working toward for years.</p> <p>The city will now move forward with drafting an ordinance to ban new drilling and evaluate how to shut down operating wells across the city. Officials will also initiate an analysis of the economic and job impacts and how to transition oil industry workers to clean energy jobs. In order to decommission existing oil operations, an amortization study must be also done on how oil companies can make back their investments if they have not already done so.</p> <p>“From Wilmington to the San Fernando Valley, gas, drilling and and oil wells have disproportionately affected the health of our working-class neighborhoods,” said the council president, Nury Martinez. “This is yet another example of how frontline communities disproportionately bear the impacts of pollution and climate change.”</p> <p>Calling the move one of the strongest policies in the entire nation, she said that “Los Angeles is a city that constantly leads the way and today let it be a reminder that the city council prioritizes the health and wellbeing for every Angeleno.”</p> <p>Other members echoed her sentiments, voicing adamant support for the shift away from fossil fuels development. Many of them credited Stand LA, a coalition of environmental justice organizations founded in 2013, which has spent years organizing around the the issue and highlighting the devastating impact drilling has on residents.</p> <p>Nearly a third of Los Angeles oil and gas wells lie outside drill sites, scattered between homes, schools and parks, noted Vince Bertoni, director of planning for the city, citing data by the California geologic energy management division in a letter issued to the council last September.</p> <p>Thousands of residents live in close proximity to wells but the toxic effects are not evenly distributed, with less affluent Angelenos and people of color bearing the brunt of their environmental impact.</p> <p>A slew of studies have shown the toll drilling can have on public health, including higher rates of asthma and cardiovascular disease and increased risks of babies with low birth weights and other reproductive health issues.</p> <p>In a paper published last year, researchers from the University of Southern California (USC) noted that South LA residents – predominantly Black and Latino families – who live near active oil development have lower lung function. Deficient lung capacity “may contribute to environmental health disparities”, the researchers said, likening the health effects to daily exposure to secondhand tobacco smoke.</p>

Even the drill sites no longer in use pose a threat to health and the environment. According to an LA Times investigation published in 2020, [abandoned wells in the city are still emitting toxic gases](#).

“In this community-driven research, we found that living close to oil sites is associated with lower lung function,” said the researcher [Jill Johnston](#), an assistant professor of [preventive medicine](#) at USC’s Keck School of Medicine in a statement, adding that “these impacts raise environmental justice concerns about the effects of urban oil drilling”.

Oil industry officials cited the potential for negative economic impacts to the city in their criticism of the move, and the 8,300 jobs associated with extraction and development.

“Shutting down domestic energy production not only puts Californians out of work and reduces taxes that pay for vital services, but it makes us more dependent on imported foreign oil from Saudi Arabia and Iraq that is tankered into LA’s crowded port,” Rock Zierman, CEO of California Independent Petroleum Association said, noting that California’s crude is more regulated than imports. He also questioned the city’s ability to legally move forward with the plan. “Taking someone’s property without compensation, particularly one which is duly permitted and highly regulated, is illegal and violates the US constitution’s fifth amendment against illegal search and seizure,” he said.

Kevin Slagle, a spokesman for the Western States Petroleum Association, argued in an email: “An energy transition that can actually work for communities, families and workers will not be accomplished through production bans and mandating people out of their careers.” He added that climate goals would “best accomplished through collaboration and the innovation and hard work of the people of our industry”.

The city’s decision follows a separate motion from the Los Angeles county board of supervisors, which voted unanimously to phase out drilling in unincorporated areas last September on similar grounds. Supervisor Holly Mitchell, who penned two motions on the issue, said that of the tens of thousands of people living near drilling sites, close to 73% were people of color. The Inglewood oilfield – a site that has on average produced up to 3.1bn barrels a year over the last decade – falls in Mitchell’s jurisdiction.

“In addition to this equity issue, which should concern all of us, oil and gas drilling is contributing to the climate crisis, which we are collectively bearing witness to every single day,” Mitchell [told](#) the LA Times in September.

The state of California is also [moving forward with new rules requiring drilling](#) to be set at least 3,200ft from “sensitive locations”, which include homes, schools and hospitals. State officials are undertaking a comprehensive economic analysis of the proposal. The plan, which was praised by environmental justice advocates, has been criticized because it enables [existing wells to continue operating](#) and only applies to new development. The California department of conservation geologic energy management division found roughly 30% of the state’s production occurs within the 3,200ft threshold.

Los Angeles is planning to go further.

“It has been a long slog,” said councilmember Paul Koretz during the meeting, highlighting the ways in which drilling in his district has harmed residents. “This effort is over 100 years overdue – and it is about time.”

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HEADLINE	01/26 WTO sides w/China in tariff fight w/US
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/wto-arbiter-sides-with-china-in-tariff-fight-with-u-s-11643241414?mod=hp_lead_pos3
GIST	WASHINGTON—The World Trade Organization on Wednesday authorized China to impose retaliatory tariffs worth \$645 million on imports from the U.S. in a decade-old dispute over Chinese subsidies to promote exports of products such as solar panels and steel pipes.

The ruling was made by a WTO arbitration panel in a case dating back to 2012. China had complained about [the tariffs the U.S. imposed between 2008 and 2012](#) on solar panels and other products that the U.S. said were produced with unfair subsidies to state-owned companies.

The WTO's high-level dispute-settlement court delivered a mixed ruling on the fight in 2018, saying the U.S.'s tariffs were in violation of WTO rules.

Since then, the two countries squabbled over the compliance with the ruling and the amount of the compensation China should be allowed to collect in retaliatory tariffs, handing the case to a WTO arbitration panel.

Adam Hodge, a spokesman for the U.S. Trade Representative's Office, blasted the decision, saying the WTO protects "China's nonmarket economic practices and undermines fair, market-oriented competition."

The decision "reinforces the need to reform" the WTO's rules and dispute settlement functions, he added.

A spokesman for China's Commerce Ministry said it reserved the right to take further actions, without elaborating, and would watch closely for U.S. follow-up actions.

"The WTO ruling once again proved that the U.S. has long violated WTO rules, abused trade remedies and refused to fulfill the international obligations clearly stipulated in WTO rulings and rules," Commerce Ministry spokesman Gao Feng said at a weekly briefing on Thursday.

Chad Bown, a senior fellow at Peterson Institute for International Economics, said that if China chooses to implement the retaliatory tariffs authorized by the WTO, it would risk "re-initiating a tariff escalation of the U.S.-China trade war, that is now in a fragile state of truce."

The U.S. and China [signed a trade pact in 2020](#) that called for China to increase its purchases of U.S. goods. [China has failed to meet those purchase commitments](#), however, and tariffs remain on Chinese apparel, electronics, furniture and other items.

The latest case is among several the two nations have fought at the WTO over the role played by China's state-owned enterprises in promoting exports of manufactured goods using subsidies. The U.S. and other free-market nations have complained that Beijing gives unfair advantages to Chinese manufacturers over companies from their nations.

Complaining that the WTO gave favorable treatment to China in disputes over such issues, the U.S. has in recent years blocked the appointments of judges to the Appellate Body, the group's high-level trade settlement court, effectively shutting it down in December 2019.

The decision comes as the Biden administration begins conversations with some WTO member nations to overhaul the WTO, which has struggled to forge new trade deals and settle disputes among its members amid the confrontation between the U.S. and China. The latest decision favoring China is "one more motivation for why the U.S., China, EU and other major WTO members need to figure out new rules [on] countervailing duties," Mr. Bown said.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Lawsuit over National Guard vaccine rule
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/northwest/alaska-texas-governors-sue-over-national-guard-vaccine-rule/
GIST	JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy has joined Texas Gov. Greg Abbott in seeking to block the U.S. Department of Defense from mandating COVID-19 vaccines for National Guard members who are under state command.

The Pentagon has required COVID-19 vaccination for all service members, including the National Guard and Reserve. Attorneys for the two governors, in an amended lawsuit dated Tuesday, say that when National Guard members are serving the state, the federal government has no command authority. The lawsuit said the mandate is an unconstitutional overstepping of bounds.

The case dealing with Alaska and Texas guard members is an amended version of the challenge filed by Texas earlier this month.

More than 220 members of the Texas Air National Guard and about 40% of Texas Army National Guard members are refusing to be vaccinated for “either religious accommodation needs or otherwise,” according to the lawsuit. About 8% of Alaska Air and Army National Guard members have not received a first dose of any COVID-19 vaccine and of these members, “more than 90% have requested a medical or religious exemption, yet no such exemptions have been granted.”

“A small number of additional Alaska National Guard members are refusing any COVID-19 vaccine,” the lawsuit said.

The lawsuit names as defendants President Joe Biden, the Department of Defense and military officials.

The White House referred a reporter seeking comment on the lawsuit to the Department of Defense, which did not immediately respond to an email from The Associated Press.

A federal judge last month ruled against Oklahoma in its lawsuit challenging the vaccine mandates for the state’s guard members.

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HEADLINE	01/27 Russia military emerges as modern, lethal
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/europe/russia-military-putin-ukraine.html
GIST	<p>MOSCOW — In the early years of Vladimir V. Putin’s tenure as Russia’s leader, the country’s military was a hollowed-out but nuclear-armed shell.</p> <p>It struggled to keep submarines afloat in the Arctic and an outgunned insurgency at bay in Chechnya. Senior officers sometimes lived in moldy, rat-infested tenements. And instead of socks, poorly trained soldiers often wrapped their feet in swaths of cloth, the way their Soviet and Tsarist predecessors had.</p> <p>Two decades later, it is a far different fighting force that has massed near the border with Ukraine. Under Mr. Putin’s leadership, it has been overhauled into a modern sophisticated army, able to deploy quickly and with lethal effect in conventional conflicts, military analysts said. It features precision-guided weaponry, a newly streamlined command structure and well-fed and professional soldiers. And they still have the nuclear weapons.</p> <p>The modernized military has emerged as a key tool of Mr. Putin’s foreign policy: capturing Crimea, intervening in Syria, keeping the peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan and, just this month, propping up a Russia-friendly leader in Kazakhstan. Now it is in the middle of its most ambitious — and most ominous — operation yet: using threats and potentially, many fear, force, to bring Ukraine back into Moscow’s sphere of influence.</p> <p>“The mobility of the military, its preparedness and its equipment are what allow Russia to pressure Ukraine and to pressure the West,” said Pavel Luzin, a Russian security analyst. “Nuclear weapons are not enough.”</p> <p>Without firing a shot, Mr. Putin has forced the Biden administration to shelve other foreign policy priorities and contend with Kremlin grievances the White House has long dismissed — in particular reversing Ukraine’s Westward lean in the post-Soviet period.</p>

It is Mr. Putin's highest-stakes use of the military to muscle Russia back into the global relevance it lost with the ending of the Cold War. Mr. Putin laid out that doctrine in 2018, when he used his annual state-of-the-nation speech to unveil new nuclear weapons that could fly 20 times the speed of sound.

"No one listened to us," Mr. Putin said in his address, which included a video simulation showing a Russian missile heading toward the United States. "Listen to us now."

Today, it is the overhaul of the conventional forces that has provided leverage in the Ukraine crisis.

The T-72B3 tanks amassed on Ukraine's border have a new thermal optics system for nighttime fighting as well as guided missiles with twice the range of other tanks, according to Robert Lee, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and Ph.D. candidate at King's College in London, who is a Russian military expert. Kalibr cruise missiles deployed on ships and submarines in the Black Sea and Iskander-M rockets arrayed along the border can hit targets just about anywhere inside Ukraine, Mr. Lee said.

In the last decade, the Russian air force has acquired more than 1,000 new aircraft, according to a 2020 article by Aleksei Krivoruchko, a deputy defense minister. This includes the country's most advanced fighters, the SU-35S; a squadron of these has been deployed to Belarus ahead of joint military exercises next month.

The new capabilities were evident in Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015. They were not only effective, but caught some in the U.S. military off guard.

"I'm embarrassed to admit, I was surprised a few years ago when Kalibr missiles came flying out of the Caspian Sea, hitting targets in Syria," said Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, the former commander of the U.S. Army in Europe. "That was a surprise to me, not only the capability, but I didn't even know they were there."

Kremlin thinking has also evolved over the size of the armed forces. The military relies less on a dwindling number of conscripts and more on a slimmed-down, well-trained core of roughly 400,000 contract soldiers.

These soldiers receive better treatment. Visiting the Defense Ministry in December, Mr. Putin boasted that the average lieutenant now made just over the equivalent of \$1,000 per month, better than the average salary in other sectors. The federal government, he added, was spending about \$1.5 billion on subsidizing private housing for service members.

And all Russian soldiers are now required to be deployed with [thick, military issued socks](#).

What is new is not just Russia's upgraded equipment, but the evolving theory of how the Kremlin uses it. The military has honed an approach that Dmitry Adamsky, a scholar of international security at Reichman University in Israel, calls "cross-domain coercion" — blending the real or threatened use of force with diplomacy, cyberattacks and propaganda to achieve political aims.

That blended strategy is playing out in the current crisis around Ukraine. Russia is pushing for immediate wide-ranging concessions from the West. Russian troop movements into allied Belarus put a potential invasion force within 100 miles of Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital. Russian state media is warning that Ukrainian forces are the ones preparing acts of aggression.

And on Jan. 14, [hackers brought down dozens of Ukrainian government websites](#) and posted a message on one stating, "Be afraid and expect the worst."

"You see some cyber, you see diplomacy, you see military exercises," Mr. Adamsky said. "They are all related by design."

Not all the forces arrayed along the Ukrainian border are Russia's most advanced. The ones amassed in the north have older weaponry and are mostly there to intimidate and stretch Ukrainian resources, said Oleksiy Arestovych, a former Ukrainian military intelligence officer who is now a political and military analyst.

The more well-equipped and modernized units, he said, have moved into the area close to two breakaway provinces in Ukraine's east, where Russia instigated a separatist war in 2014 that continues today.

Russia's military modernization is also, increasingly, meant to send a message to the United States, projecting power beyond Eastern Europe, frustrating and sometimes surprising American officials.

It took Russia's military transport planes only hours, for instance, to start ferrying about 2,000 Russian peacekeeping troops, along with heavy armor, to the Southern Caucasus after Mr. Putin brokered an end to the 2020 war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In Syria, where Russia intervened in 2015 using devastating airstrikes and limited ground troops to protect President Bashar al-Assad, Russia's advancements showed it could effectively deploy precision-guided weaponry, long an edge that Western armed forces had held over Russia.

Russia used the war in Syria, experts say, as a laboratory to refine tactics and weaponry, and to gain combat experience for much of its force. More responsibility was delegated to lower-level officers, a degree of autonomy that contrasts with the civilian government structure in the Putin era. Defense Minister Sergei K. Shoigu [said](#) last month that all ground troop commanders, 92 percent of air force pilots and 62 percent of the Navy had combat experience.

"They showed to themselves and the whole world they are able to wage large-scale operations with precision weapons, and long-range weapons, and intelligence capability to support it," Mr. Adamsky, the expert based in Israel, said.

For all its strides in recent years, Russia's military retains a critical weakness of its Soviet predecessor: the civilian side of the country's economy, nearly devoid of high-tech manufacturing and corporate investment in research and development. Army expenditures amount to a far higher percentage of the gross domestic product than in most European countries, starving other sectors.

When Ukraine's military shot down Russian [reconnaissance drones](#), for example, they discovered electronics and motors bought from hobby drone companies in Western Europe, [according to a report](#) published in November by Conflict Armament Research, a company based in Britain that specializes in tracing weaponry.

Russia possesses few new weapons systems fully created from the ground up, analysts say. Much of its modernization consists of refurbishments of older equipment.

But individual weapons systems are less important than the military's innovative use of knowledge gained in each of the engagements of Mr. Putin's tenure, said General Philip M. Breedlove, who was NATO commander when war broke out in Ukraine in 2014.

"The compliment that we have to pay to Russia is that they are a learning and adaptive force," General Breedlove said. "Every time we see them in conflict, they get a little better and a little better."

Mr. Putin was only a few months into his first presidential term when he faced a military catastrophe. On Aug. 12, 2000, a torpedo exploded inside the nuclear submarine Kursk, sending it to the Barents Sea floor with 118 sailors. The Russian Navy's failed [rescue mission](#), leading to the deaths of all aboard and an uncharacteristic [mea culpa](#) from Mr. Putin, underscored the military's ineptitude.

The sinking came to define Mr. Putin's first term, along with a vicious and bloody war in Chechnya where the Russian military struggled for years to quash an Islamist insurgency.

A major turning point came in 2008 when a long-simmering conflict over disputed territories in the Republic of Georgia exploded into war.

Russian forces quickly overwhelmed their much smaller Georgian neighbors, but the war uncovered deep deficiencies in the Russian military. Ground troops were not in radio contact with the Air Force, leading to several serious friendly fire attacks. Communications were so bad that some officers had to use their personal cellphones. Tanks and armored personnel carriers broke down frequently.

The failures prompted a massive shake-up of the Russian armed forces. The Soviet military's prowess at land warfare was revived, with improvements such as revamped artillery technology, according to Mathieu Boulègue, a research fellow in the Russia and Eurasia program at Chatham House in London.

Just over a decade later, Russia's tools of electronic warfare, which can be used to intercept or jam enemy communications and knock drones off course and out of the sky, are believed far superior to the U.S. military's, analysts said.

"We're playing catch-up now," General Hodges said. "For the last 20 years, we were focused on iPhones or cellphones and terrorist networks, while they continued to develop substantial, powerful jamming and intercept capabilities."

There have been some setbacks for Moscow, including unsettling [weapons failures](#). In 2019, a prototype of a nuclear-propelled cruise missile — hailed by Mr. Putin as the centerpiece of a new arms race with the United States — [blew up during a test](#), killing at least seven people and spewing radiation for miles.

But as the Kremlin's rhetoric increasingly cast Russia as locked in an existential conflict with the West, little expense was spared. The investment in the military was accompanied by a [militarization of Russian society under Mr. Putin](#), entrenching the concept of a motherland surrounded by enemies and the possibility of a coming war.

All those developments, analysts say, make it hard for the West to stop Mr. Putin from attacking Ukraine, if he is determined.

"There's very little we can do to deny Russia's ability to wage further warfare against Ukraine," Mr. Boulègue said. "We can't deter a worldview."

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HEADLINE	01/27 Ukraine soldier kills 5 in missile factory
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/27/world/ukraine-russia-us#ukraine-soldiers-shooting
GIST	<p>KRAMATORSK, Ukraine — A national guard soldier in Ukraine opened fire on Thursday at a missile and rocket factory in the eastern part of the country, killing five people and wounding five others, the police said.</p> <p>While details of the shooting were scarce and there was no immediate sign that it was related to the military buildup in the region, it underscored the dangers of the moment as fears of a Russian attack on Ukraine grow by the day.</p> <p>The gunman fled the scene, leading to a sprawling manhunt that lasted for hours before a suspect was taken into custody, according to the police. He was identified as Artemiy Ryabchuk, and his birth year was given as 2001, but the police released few other details about him.</p> <p>Even as the investigation proceeded, the episode was caught in the murkiness of a broader geopolitical struggle between the West and Russia, in which the Kremlin is trying to reduce the Western presence in a region that it considers within its sphere of influence.</p> <p>This month, the United States said, Russia had dispatched intelligence agents and saboteurs into eastern Ukraine to stage a provocation, with the region's industrial infrastructure seen as a potential target.</p>

The site of the shooting early on Thursday morning — the Southern Machine Building Plant, an aerospace and rocket factory that U.S. officials [have long viewed as posing a risk of weapons proliferation](#) — is precisely the kind of strategic location that Western officials are watching intensely.

They worry that Russia might point to any sign of instability inside Ukraine as a pretext for a military intervention. Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, said this month that the United States believed Russia was potentially seeking to manufacture events that it could cite as a reason to invade, “including through sabotage.”

The shooting took place in Dnipro, one of the largest cities in the country and more than 100 miles from the frontline of the war in eastern Ukraine.

Given that the factory was once a production site for intercontinental ballistic missiles, it was tightly guarded even before the latest tensions.

The police said that shortly before 4 a.m., as soldiers were collecting their weapons in a guard house, the gunman opened fire. There were 22 people in the room at the time, the authorities said.

Four of those killed were fellow soldiers. A female employee of the factory was also killed, the police said. Five other people were wounded.

A [statement](#) from Ukraine’s interior ministry, which oversees the police, said that the soldier had turned his weapon on fellow service members who were guarding the plant, and then fled.

The statement said the soldier had fired “for undetermined reasons.”

Later, Denys Monastyrsky, Ukraine’s minister of interior, wrote in a post on Facebook that police were examining the suspect’s medical records since the time of his enlistment, suggesting the investigation would include the possibility of a psychological disorder.

The attack came only hours after [the United States and NATO provided written responses to Russian demands](#) over Western nations’ presence in former Soviet states, saying some security issues could be discussed while others were nonnegotiable.

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HEADLINE	01/26 France, Germany, Russia, Ukraine meet
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/27/world/ukraine-russia-us#france-germany-russia-and-ukraine-meet-in-search-of-ways-to-ease-the-conflict-and-agree-to-keep-talking
GIST	<p>PARIS — Bringing together senior Russian and Ukrainian officials, France and Germany tried on Wednesday to coax the countries into easing tensions between them, before planned talks on Friday between the French and Russian presidents.</p> <p>With Russian forces massed near the borders of Ukraine, senior diplomats at the gathering known as the Normandy Format — a diplomatic grouping of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine that has met occasionally since 2014 — discussed how to lower the temperature in their standoff.</p> <p>After more than eight hours of talks in Paris, the group released a statement, through the French presidency, reaffirming unconditional support for the 2015 cease-fire, updated in 2020, between Russian-backed separatist forces in eastern Ukraine and the government in Kyiv.</p> <p>The statement made no direct mention of worries about a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine, as the discussions focused instead on the cease-fire agreement, known as the Minsk Accord, which the Normandy group helped broker. The diplomats will meet again in Berlin in two weeks, it said.</p>

A senior official in the French presidency said the discussions were “difficult” but somewhat encouraging. The official, speaking on condition of anonymity in keeping with French government practice, said the meeting was a way to “test the willingness of the Russians to negotiate.”

“Our conclusion is that we got the sign of re-engagement that we were looking for,” the official said.

For President Emmanuel Macron of France, the meeting offered an opportunity to showcase Europeans trying to solve Europe’s problems. He has made [what he calls](#) “European strategic autonomy” — in other words, greater independence from the United States — a central theme of his presidency, while positioning himself as Europe’s de facto leader.

The meeting Wednesday brought together the Kremlin’s deputy chief of staff, Dmitri Kozak, and the Ukrainian presidential adviser Andriy Yermak. They were joined by the top diplomatic advisers to Mr. Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Russia’s core demand is that Ukraine never become a member of NATO. In 2008, NATO leaders declared that Ukraine and Georgia, former Soviet republics, “will become members of NATO.”

The timing for such membership was left open, and there has been little or no progress toward it in the almost 14 years since, but the statement has remained a thorn in Russia’s side. For Mr. Putin it was part of a series of humiliating *faits accomplis* presented to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as NATO expanded eastward and lands that have been under Moscow’s thumb moved into the Western sphere. Now the Russian leader seems determined to impose his own outcomes on the ground.

Separate talks on Ukraine between the United States and Russia, held mainly in Geneva in recent months, have left France uneasy. “President Biden and Putin in Geneva discussing Europe eclipses Macron,” Jacques Rupnik, a prominent political scientist, said. “So this meeting today was important for him on the symbolic level.”

With a presidential election looming in April, the longtime Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel now gone, and France holding the rotating presidency of the European Union for the first time since 2008, the French president is [eager to demonstrate decisive European leadership](#). It is not clear, however, that the rest of Europe is prepared to follow him.

The Normandy group formed after Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. It offered a context for talks that exclude the United States, without getting bogged down in U.S.-Russia disputes. Its name stems from the date of the group’s creation, June 6, 2014, the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy, France, during World War II.

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HEADLINE	01/26 US faces surge in seaborne migration
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/us/capsized-boat-florida.html
GIST	<p>KEY WEST, Fla. — The maritime disaster that left rescuers still searching on Wednesday for 38 migrants lost at sea in the Florida Straits comes amid a surge in seaborne migration on both coasts as thousands of people board flimsy boats in a desperate attempt to reach the United States.</p> <p>The makeshift boatlifts, carrying migrants from countries all over the world, present an unexpected and fresh challenge for the Biden administration, which was already facing a substantial increase in unauthorized crossings on the southern land border with Mexico.</p> <p>The Coast Guard at times has intercepted more than 100 Cubans, Dominicans and Haitians crammed into a single boat in choppy Florida waters. On the other side of the country, smuggling networks have ferried loads of undocumented immigrants from Yemen, Mexico and Central America, sailing from Mexico to Southern California.</p>

Experts attributed the surge in sea smuggling to beefed-up land-border enforcement combined with shrinking opportunities in developing countries stemming from the coronavirus pandemic.

With a president in the White House who had promised a softer approach to the border than his predecessor, smugglers and migrants have felt emboldened, especially as thousands of migrant families have been let into the United States in spite of a public health order that allows border agents to immediately expel them back to Mexico.

“The perception among migrants and smugglers is that Biden has essentially loosened the rules,” said Seth Stodder, who was a senior Homeland Security official under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. “There is a desire to test this administration.”

In addition, deteriorating conditions in their home countries, including economic insecurity, political instability, violence and natural disasters, are acting as “push factors,” he said.

The search operation for the migrants lost at sea began at about 8 a.m. on Tuesday when a commercial mariner reported seeing a 25-foot boat capsized about 40 miles east of Fort Pierce, Fla. A tug and barge pulled a survivor off the hull who was taken to a hospital to be treated for dehydration and sun exposure.

The man, whose nationality was not released, told the authorities that he had left Bimini, in the Bahamas, on Saturday night with 39 other people. One of them was found dead. The vessel capsized shortly after leaving in conditions that included a severe cold front, up to nine-foot seas and 23-mile-per-hour winds. No one was wearing a life jacket, and the prospects of finding any more survivors was looking increasingly grim, said Capt. Jo-Ann Burdian, the commander of the Coast Guard’s Miami station.

“It is dire,” Captain Burdian said at a news conference on Wednesday.

In the 2021 fiscal year, more than 3,200 migrants were apprehended trying to reach the United States by sea. Southern California is believed to have experienced the busiest year of maritime smuggling on record, with 1,968 apprehensions. The Florida authorities detained 1,316 Cubans, Haitians and Dominicans — representing the bulk of all migrants — in the 2021 fiscal year, compared with 588 in 2020 and 748 in 2019.

While those numbers are dwarfed by the 1.7 million land-border encounters with migrants during the 2021 fiscal year, the full extent of ocean traffic remains unknown because the data represents only events in which people are detained or a vessel is recovered.

“It’s the worst it’s ever been,” said Mark Levan, a supervisory marine interdiction agent with the Office of Air and Marine operations in San Diego who has been on the job for 20 years. “It used to be there was one event taking place a week involving a migrant vessel. Now, most weeks it’s three or four, sometimes five.”

Many people manage to enter the United States undetected. “They wouldn’t be doing it if they weren’t getting away,” Mr. Levan said.

Customs and Border Protection aircraft fly overhead and Interceptor vessels patrol in the water but, as along the land border, smugglers use spotters to relay law enforcement’s aerial and maritime movements.

Ruber Sosa Lechuga, 56, an air-conditioning technician in Fort Myers, Fla., paid \$2,500 to make the voyage across the Mona Passage near Puerto Rico in 2006. He has simple advice for anyone who is considering migrating by sea.

“I would tell anyone, the worst enemy of mine, not to do it,” Mr. Sosa said. “It’s too dangerous.” Mr. Sosa, who is Cuban, first traveled to the Dominican Republic, and then went by boat with his wife and son, 12 at the time, to Puerto Rico. It took 11 terrifying hours. He still remembers the size of the waves.

“How many Cubans haven’t died in the Straits of Florida?” he said. “They prefer to die then live under this tyranny.”

He added: “I tell everyone, try to do things legally. Try to come in a plane.”

The price nowadays to make the passage by sea surpasses the sums charged by smugglers to transport people over land.

In California, criminal organizations are collecting \$15,000 to \$20,000 per Mexican national, and up to \$70,000 for people from other countries, to transport people by sea, said Joseph Di Meglio, assistant special agent in charge of Homeland Security Investigations in San Diego.

“The reality is it’s a low-risk, high-reward operation,” he said.

Alejandro N. Mayorkas, the secretary of homeland security, said last July at a news conference that people trying to migrate by sea would not be permitted to enter the United States.

“To those who risk their lives doing so, this risk is not worth taking,” he said.

Without shelter from the elements and at the mercy of their handlers, many migrants have died en route.

The boat that capsized over the weekend appeared to be part of a human-smuggling operation gone awry, the authorities said.

“The waters in the Northern Straits can be quite treacherous,” Captain Burdian said.

The Coast Guard has searched about 7,500 nautical miles, an area about the size of New Jersey, she said. The search was continuing on Wednesday, but at some point, she said, officials would have to call off the operation as the chances of survival grew more slim.

The authorities in the Bahamas said information about the boat and those aboard it was still being gathered.

“Everything is sketchy right now,” said Keith Bell, minister of immigration in the Bahamas. He said the authorities were still trying to confirm “whether or not it did in fact come from Bimini and who were these persons.”

The number of Cubans making the perilous journey is smaller than the numbers that arrived before January 2017, when the Obama administration ended the policy that had allowed Cubans to remain legally in the United States once they touched U.S. soil. But numbers are climbing quickly as economic hardship and government crackdowns intensify on the Caribbean island.

In July, nine Cubans went missing after capsizing 26 miles from Cuba, while 13 others survived. In May, 10 Cubans died and eight others survived a shipwreck south of Key West, Fla.

Haitian migrants have been leaving a country engulfed in gang violence, political upheaval and destitution after the assassination of the president and a deadly earthquake.

Migrants arriving in California typically have journeyed to the Mexican border from Central America or even farther.

Smugglers on the West Coast typically use rudimentary flat-bottomed fishing boats, called pangas, that pick up migrants on the beaches in Baja California, the Mexican state just south of California. But they have also tried to blend in with recreational traffic by employing pleasure boats, such as sailboats and cabin cruisers, Mr. Di Meglio, the Homeland Security investigator, said.

In the span of two weeks in August, the authorities on the West Coast halted six maritime smuggling attempts. Pangas have managed to make landfall, undetected, in the wee hours of the night up the coast from San Diego to as far as Newport Beach in Orange County, and Long Beach and Malibu near Los Angeles.

Many of the smuggling operations on the East Coast have departed from Bimini, a chain of small islands in the Bahamas populated by fewer than 2,000 people. They are the closest inhabited islands to the United States.

Just a day before the vessel that overturned with 40 migrants departed Bimini, another boat with 31 migrants capsized, the Royal Bahamas Defense Force said. All those migrants, including one woman trapped under the boat, were rescued.

On Jan. 16, a migrant vessel with two Bahamians, two Ecuadoreans and two Colombians took on water in North Bimini and had to be rescued.

And on New Year's Day, 20 people were apprehended near Nassau, including nationals of Ecuador, Colombia, Honduras and Africa, according to local news reports.

The migrant operations, Bimini residents said, are conducted furtively. "You don't see it in the community, you only hear things," said Robbie Smith, the former Bimini chief councilor. "If they're doing it, they're doing it when people are sleeping at night."

Homeland Security Investigations has opened a criminal investigation into the voyage that is the subject of the latest search, said Anthony Salisbury, the special agent in charge in Miami.

In addition to overloading migrants on small vessels with no life jackets, smugglers sometimes kidnap, extort or force migrants into prostitution, he said.

"There has been a marked increase in maritime smuggling ventures in South Florida," he said. "These criminal organizations have no regard for human life. They look at the migrants as package and payday."

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HEADLINE	01/26 UK's other health crisis: non-Covid backlog
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/world/europe/coronavirus-uk-nhs-backlog.html
GIST	<p>LONDON — Lara Wahab had been waiting for more than two years for a kidney and pancreas transplant, but months had passed without any word. So last month she called the hospital, and got crushing news.</p> <p>There had been a good match for her in October, the transplant coordinator told her, which the hospital normally would have accepted. But with Covid-19 patients filling beds, the transplant team could not find her a place in the intensive care unit for postoperative care. They had to decline the organs.</p> <p>"I was just in shock. I knew that the N.H.S. was under a lot of strain, but you don't really know until you're waiting for something like that," she said, referring to the National Health Service. "It was there, but it sort of slipped through my fingers," she added of the transplant opportunity.</p> <p>Ms. Wahab, 34, from North London, is part of an enormous and growing backlog of patients in Britain's free health service who have seen planned care delayed or diverted, in part because of the pandemic — a largely unseen crisis within a crisis. The problems are likely to have profound consequences that will be felt for years.</p> <p>The numbers are stark: In England, nearly 6 million procedures are currently delayed, a rise from the backlog of 4.6 million before the pandemic, according to the N.H.S. The current delays most likely impact more than five million people — a single patient can have multiple cases pending for different ailments —</p>

which represents almost one-tenth of the population. Hundreds of thousands more haven't been referred yet for treatment, and many ailments have simply gone undiagnosed.

There was already a huge and rising backlog of patients before the pandemic, but the unrelenting burden of the past two years, with health staff and hospital capacity stretched even thinner by coronavirus cases, saw it balloon to record proportions. The latest official figures are almost two months out of date, and experts say that severe staffing shortages this winter and the wildfire spread of the Omicron variant have almost certainly made the situation worse.

"Just because we've got Omicron doesn't mean that other illnesses have just stopped still and don't emerge and develop in people, sadly," said Saffron Cordery, the deputy chief executive of N.H.S. Providers, a membership organization for health workers.

Public health experts worry that even if the pandemic eases and relieves some of the immediate burden, the pandemic and delayed care could do lasting harm to the health system, as well as patients.

This month, [a report from the parliamentary health committee](#) revealed a complex and troubling picture of record waiting lists, high caseloads and severe staffing shortages. It warned that a major expansion of the labor force was needed, but that the government was not doing enough to recruit and train health workers.

Generations of Britons have [endured longer waits](#) for treatment than many insured Americans, with most accepting that as the price of caring for everyone. But the problem has worsened for almost a decade, with critics accusing Conservative governments of [steadily underfunding the system](#).

In 2012, there were 2.5 million cases awaiting specialist treatment in England. By the start of 2020, the backlog had swelled to 4.6 million cases, according to the N.H.S.

At the end of November 2021, the caseload was six million. More than 300,000 cases have been waiting for more than a year for planned care. A decade ago, there were fewer than 500.

The true backlog is probably much bigger, experts and government officials say. As the health committee noted in its report, the pandemic has greatly disrupted normal patterns of assessments and referrals by primary care doctors, keeping people off the official tallies.

A recent [report from the National Audit Office](#) estimated that there were 7.8 million to 9.8 million "missing" referrals — those that ordinarily would have occurred but never did — by primary care physicians from the start of the pandemic to September 2021, including 240,000 to 740,000 for suspected cancer cases.

"We are likely to see knock-on effects with people with other diseases, including but not limited to cancer, where treatment got delayed or postponed or we missed out on it," said Peter English, a retired consultant in communicable disease control. "And they died because they didn't have treatment they would otherwise have had."

By [the time the pandemic hit Britain](#), Ms. Wahab had been on the transplant list for months. In April 2019, her doctor told her that the Type 1 diabetes she has had since age 7 had left her with kidney failure and that her best chance at recovery was a simultaneous pancreas and kidney transplant.

Her doctors told her that it would take about six months to get onto the transplant list and then typically about a year to be matched with a donor.

But in the spring of 2020, overwhelmed hospitals across the country halted nonemergency care, including transplants, diverting staff to coronavirus response.

Since then, transplants have resumed and stopped, again and again. With each pandemic surge that [filled intensive care units](#), the first treatments to be put on hold were planned procedures requiring intensive care beds — like transplants.

Because she has managed to stay off dialysis despite her worsening condition, Ms. Wahab is a more desirable transplant candidate because her likelihood of a positive outcome is better. But she is not sure how much longer she can hold on.

“It’s having a devastating effect on my day-to-day life,” she said. “I feel really hopeless going into 2022 — I’ve been waiting for this operation now for nearly three years.”

James Wilkinson, 46, was diagnosed with endocarditis, an inflammation of the lining of his heart caused by an infection that ate away at his aortic valve, and he had originally been booked for an operation in May 2020. The operation was canceled because of the pandemic. And then it was rescheduled and canceled three more times.

Mr. Wilkinson, who testified in front of a parliamentary committee late last year about his experience, said that he had eventually turned to private care to have the operation — something few people could afford.

“If it wasn’t for the private health care, we don’t know when my operation would have happened,” he said. But it is not only those waiting for care they know they need who have been hurt. Cancer charities have warned that delays in diagnosing will also have devastating impacts.

Macmillan Cancer Support, a charity, estimates that some [50,000 people across Britain](#) have not yet been diagnosed with some form of cancer that should have been caught earlier, in a direct result of the pandemic’s hindering screenings and referrals. The number of women being diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer — which means that the disease is advanced and very dangerous — [has jumped by 48 percent](#) in recent months.

Danni Moore, now 31, found a lump in her breast in early 2020, just before the pandemic. Ms. Moore, a mother to two children, was still breastfeeding her youngest and thought that she had a blocked milk duct. But her doctor referred her to a specialist clinic.

That appointment was canceled because of the pandemic. She rescheduled, but then had to cancel herself because her partner had contracted the virus and their household had to isolate.

“The knock-on effect Covid had has made everything much more difficult, and I had the lump way longer than I should have,” she said. “And it’s partly my fault. I should have gone much sooner, but equally hindsight is a wonderful thing.”

Ms. Moore said she put off making another appointment, and months went by. But then the lump grew, and in the spring of 2021, a year after she first found it, it was diagnosed as breast cancer. The months since have been an exhausting whirlwind of chemotherapy treatments and complications, which she has [documented on her Instagram account](#).

While her treatment this year has continued without delay, and she credits the doctors and nurses with saving her life, she knows her initial diagnosis would have come sooner without the pandemic.

The surgery backlog has also influenced her decisions on what comes next. Ms. Moore has opted to have a double mastectomy, which is scheduled for early February. She said that she felt she could more readily live with having both breasts removed than having one removed and waiting an unknown length of time to have reconstructive surgery to reach a “new normal.”

“I have two young children,” she said. “I’ve already given up over a year to having cancer.”

	She added: "I just don't want to sit and just wait for another two or three and make this process longer than it ever needed to be."
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HEADLINE	01/27 Encouraging signs but pandemic not ended
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/health/omicron-covid-pandemic.html
GIST	<p>After a frenetic few weeks when the Omicron variant of the coronavirus seemed to infect everyone, including the vaccinated and boosted, the United States is finally seeing encouraging signs.</p> <p>As cases decline in some parts of the country, many have begun to hope that this surge is the last big battle with the virus — that because of its unique characteristics, the Omicron variant will usher Americans out of the pandemic.</p> <p>The variant spiked in South Africa and Britain, then fell off quickly. Twitter is agog over charts showing declining virus levels in sewage in Boston and San Francisco. On Monday, the top European regional official of the World Health Organization suggested that "Omicron offers plausible hope for stabilization and normalization."</p> <p>"Things are looking good," Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the Biden administration's top adviser on the pandemic, said on Sunday. "We don't want to get overconfident, but they look like they're going in the right direction right now."</p> <p>What's driving the optimism? The idea is that so many people are gaining immunity through vaccination or infection with Omicron that soon the coronavirus will be unable to find a foothold in our communities, and will disappear from our lives.</p> <p>But in interviews with more than a dozen epidemiologists, immunologists and evolutionary biologists, the course of the virus in the United States appeared more complicated — and a bit less rosy.</p> <p>By infecting so many people, Omicron undoubtedly brings us closer to the end of the pandemic, they said. The current surge in infections is falling back, and there is reason to hope that hospitalizations and deaths will follow.</p> <p>The path to normalcy may be short and direct, the goal just weeks away, and horrific surges may become a thing of the past. Or it may be long and bumpy, pockmarked with outbreaks over the coming months to years as the virus continues to find footing.</p> <p>In any case, it is not likely that the coronavirus will ever completely disappear, many scientists said, and herd immunity is now just a dream. The population's immunity against the virus will be imperfect, for a variety of reasons.</p> <p>"Maybe there was a short while where we could have reached that goal," said Shweta Bansal, an infectious disease modeler at Georgetown University. "But at this point, we are well beyond that."</p> <p>Instead, the coronavirus seems likely to become endemic — a permanent part of American lives, a milder illness, like the flu, that people must learn to live with and manage.</p> <p>But the future also depends on a wild card: new variants. Omicron surfaced only at the end of November. Most researchers believe other variants are coming, because too little of the world is vaccinated. Eventually some may be both highly contagious and have a knack for short-circuiting the body's immune defenses, lengthening the misery for everyone.</p> <p>"This is a choose-your-own-adventure story, and the ending is not written yet," said Anne Rimoin, an epidemiologist at the University of California, Los Angeles. "Nobody is going to be able to tell us what will happen."</p>

As of Wednesday, the United States was reporting more than 650,000 new cases daily, on average, down from more than 800,000 two weeks ago. Deaths continue to rise, at more than 2,300 per day, on average, but hospitalizations seem to be nearing a plateau, at about 155,000 per day, on average.

In the best-case scenario, as those numbers fall, many Americans may soon be able to reclaim much of their prepandemic lives. Perhaps by the spring in the Northeast, and probably later in other regions, many Americans may go to work mask-free, send their children to school and socialize with family and friends without worry.

Only those at high risk from Covid — because of their age, health status or occupation — would need regular boosters tailored to the latest variant.

“If we could keep people out of the hospital and not get terribly ill, I think we could get back to normal basically with the tests and with vaccines,” said Michel Nussenzweig, an immunologist at Rockefeller University in New York.

In the long run, many of us might experience a mild infection every few years, as with coronaviruses that cause the common cold, but would not become seriously ill.

The idea of Omicron as the last stand of the coronavirus holds enormous appeal. It’s what everybody wants, every scientist hopes for. But to get there, Americans would need to be both lucky and smart.

An endemic virus does not necessarily indicate a minor threat. Tuberculosis is endemic in India and other countries, and kills more than a million people each year. In African countries, measles is endemic. That virus constantly circulates at low levels and periodically triggers large outbreaks.

Earlier in the pandemic, health officials estimated that for the coronavirus, vaccinating about 70 percent of the population might get us past the herd immunity threshold, meaning the coronavirus becomes a negligible threat.

But the more contagious a variant, the higher the percentage of vaccinated people needed to reach the threshold. When the Alpha variant surfaced, scientists revised the level to 90 percent.

By early last year, they acknowledged that the herd immunity goal was probably out of reach.

Imperfect Immunity

How big a threat the coronavirus remains depends in part on the level of immunity that the country maintains over time. That’s a difficult assessment to make.

There are still millions in the United States and elsewhere who have no protection from the virus and no plans to be immunized. Booster shots are needed to prevent Omicron infection, and only about half of eligible Americans have received them.

Moreover, scientists know little about the strength or duration of immunity left by an Omicron infection, and they do know that the protection against infections conferred by vaccines wanes after a relatively short period. (The protection against hospitalization and death remains strong over a longer period.)

If the population’s protection against the virus is weak or transient, as is possible, then Americans may continue to experience outbreaks large enough to flood hospitals for years. To contain them, people would have to line up for annual coronavirus shots, perhaps in the fall, as they do for flu shots.

If the virus persists as an endemic threat, the number of people vulnerable to it will also change over time. Young people will age into higher risk groups or develop conditions that put them at risk, and babies will arrive without immunity.

“Whether it’s because of evolution, whether it’s because of waning or whether it’s because of population turnover, we’ve got an influx of susceptibility which allows for future transmission,” said Adam Kucharski, an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

New Variants

The lack of widespread vaccination, in the United States and worldwide, coupled with the uncertainty regarding the strength of immunity left behind by Omicron, opens the door to the possibility of new variants. Someday, one of them may dodge immune defenses as well as, or even better than, Omicron does.

“I consider Omicron an example of what endemic Covid-19 looks like,” said Kristian Andersen, a virologist at the Scripps Research Institute in San Diego. “But this doesn’t end with Omicron, because future variants will emerge.”

Neither vaccines nor infections offer so-called sterilizing immunity, meaning that the protection they offer appears to weaken over time. The protection gained from a Delta or Omicron infection may not be as effective against new variants, as the virus is changing unexpectedly quickly and in unusual ways.

Viruses typically evolve in a ladderlike pattern, with each new variant developing from the one before it. But the three riskiest variants of the coronavirus — Alpha, Delta and Omicron — evolved independently. The coronavirus wasn’t building on previous work, so to speak — it repeatedly reinvented itself.

As more and more of the world is vaccinated, evolution will favor forms of the coronavirus that can sidestep antibodies and other immune defenses.

“We could get another variant kind of out of the blue that’s responding to a selection pressure that we hadn’t really thought about, or with mutations that we didn’t really put together,” said Emma Hodcroft, a molecular epidemiologist at the University of Bern in Switzerland.

Contrary to popular myth, the coronavirus is not guaranteed to transform into a milder form over time. A virus may evolve to be less virulent if it kills its hosts before it has been passed on to others, or if it runs out of hosts to infect. Neither is true of the coronavirus.

“It doesn’t kill enough of us, to be perfectly blunt, to actually deplete its reservoir of people to infect,” said Jeffrey Shaman, an epidemiologist at Columbia University. “And it certainly is passed on from an infected person long before the virus kills.”

Even if the next variant is as mild as Omicron or even milder, a highly contagious variant may still wreak havoc on the health care system.

“When you’ve got something as transmissible as Omicron, you don’t need it to be incredibly severe to really screw things up,” said Bill Hanage, an epidemiologist at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

Treading Carefully

The future will also depend on our risk tolerance, both as individuals and as a nation. The most relevant comparison is to the flu virus, which has survived alongside humans for hundreds of years.

Like the coronavirus, the flu is primarily a threat to certain groups — in this case, older adults, children under 5, and those with weaker immune systems.

The rest of the population takes few precautions. Businesses and schools don’t require negative tests for those who have had the flu, nor do people wear masks to protect themselves against it. Only about half of adult Americans choose to be vaccinated each year.

	<p>With the coronavirus, public health officials are just now wrestling with what normal should look like, including which trade-offs are acceptable. But they do acknowledge that trade-offs are coming.</p> <p>“We don’t have a vision of what level of control we’re aiming for,” said Jennifer Nuzzo, an epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins University’s Bloomberg School of Public Health. “I just don’t think zero cases is the target for any of us.”</p> <p>This month, a group of former advisers to President Biden called on the administration to plan for a “new normal” that entails living with the coronavirus and the flu long term. Like Dr. Nuzzo, they argued that the administration should set targets for the number of hospitalizations and deaths that would trigger emergency measures.</p> <p>Given how frequently the coronavirus has upended expectations, Americans should hope for the best — but be prepared for living a bit longer with something short of that.</p> <p>“We all want this to be over,” Dr. Shaman said. “But I think we have to be a little more agnostic in our approach to this whole thing.”</p> <p>“We don’t know,” he added. “We just don’t know.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Expected to nominate a Black woman
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/us/politics/supreme-court-nominee-black-woman.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — President Biden and his legal team have spent a year preparing for this moment: the chance to make good on his pledge to name the first Black woman to the Supreme Court at a time of continuing racial reckoning for the country.</p> <p>The decision by Justice Stephen G. Breyer to retire will give Mr. Biden his most high-profile opportunity since taking office to reshape the federal judiciary, having already nominated dozens of district and appeals court judges from a range of racial, ethnic and legal backgrounds.</p> <p>His promise also underscores how much Black women have struggled to become part of a very small pool of elite judges in the nation’s higher federal courts. Speculation on Wednesday focused on a rarefied group of well-credentialed Black women who have elite educations and experience on the bench.</p> <p>The short list included Ketanji Brown Jackson, a 51-year-old judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit who graduated from Harvard Law School and clerked for Justice Breyer, and Leondra R. Kruger, a 45-year-old justice on the California Supreme Court who graduated from Yale Law School and clerked for former Justice John Paul Stevens.</p> <p>J. Michelle Childs, 55, a little-known Federal District Court judge in South Carolina whom Mr. Biden recently nominated for an appeals court, is also seen as a potential contender. One of Mr. Biden’s top congressional allies, Representative James E. Clyburn of South Carolina, told Mr. Biden during the presidential campaign that he believed she should be appointed, in part because she came from a blue-collar background, another underrepresented group among federal judges.</p> <p>Judge Jackson and Justice Kruger attended Ivy League law schools, unlike Judge Childs, who attended the University of South Carolina. And while there are some differences in the women’s backgrounds and experience, they are united in being among a relative handful of Black women who have the kind of credentials normally considered qualifications for the Supreme Court.</p> <p>The first Black woman to serve as a federal appeals court judge — an experience that in the modern era is usually a key credential in becoming a justice — was appointed by President Gerald R. Ford in 1975. By the time Mr. Biden took office more than 40 years later, only seven more had served in such a position.</p>

“If you just look at the raw numbers, it’s a telling and a sobering statistic,” said Leslie D. Davis, the chief executive of the National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms. “That makes it clear that we must do better.”

Mr. Biden has said he hopes the diversity he has brought to the high ranks of the federal government will be a centerpiece of his legacy. In addition to his record on judgeships, his decision to pick Kamala Harris as his running mate during the 2020 campaign led to her becoming the first Black woman to serve as vice president.

Half of Mr. Biden’s first 16 nominees for federal appeals courts have been Black women — as many as all previous presidents combined had appointed. That emphasis has attracted scrutiny from across the ideological spectrum. For Ms. Davis, the important point of comparison is how few Black women had previously been appointed to the federal bench.

“It’s a story that Black women’s voices have not been appreciated,” she said, “that their perspectives have not been valued, and their voices have not been heard.”

But conservatives like the National Review [legal commentator Ed Whelan](#) have pointed out that the number of Black women Mr. Biden has nominated is strikingly disproportionate to the available pool of Black women with law degrees.

According to a [2021 profile of the legal profession by the American Bar Association](#), just 4.7 percent of American lawyers are Black and 37 percent of lawyers are female. The report did not break out Black women in particular, but the implication is that roughly 2 percent of American lawyers are both Black and female.

“By Biden’s declared standard of demographic diversity, his first year of judicial nominations has clearly been a remarkable success,” [Mr. Whelan wrote](#) this month, calling Mr. Biden’s record on appointing Black women “extraordinary” while also taking “some delight in noting” that liberal white males, with just two appellate nomination slots so far, were “the big losers.”

Mr. Biden made his [promise to name a Black woman](#) to the Supreme Court at a debate in February 2020, just days before facing his Democratic rivals in the South Carolina primary, where Black people make up a large portion of the party’s voters. At the time, his campaign was struggling amid losses in two of the early presidential contests.

“I’m looking forward to making sure there’s a Black woman on the Supreme Court to make sure we in fact get everyone represented,” Mr. Biden said that night.

The promise helped Mr. Biden secure the [support of Mr. Clyburn](#) just days before the party’s contest in South Carolina.

“I have three daughters,” Mr. Clyburn told Bloomberg. “I think I would be less than a good dad if I did not say to the president-to-be, this is an issue that is simmering in the African-American community, that Black women think they have as much right to sit on the Supreme Court as any other women, and up to that point none had been considered.”

Mr. Biden went on to win the South Carolina primary, proving the durability of his support among Black voters and setting in motion a string of victories on Super Tuesday a short time later.

His Supreme Court selection will take place in a country still feeling the reverberations of the police killing of George Floyd in 2020 and subsequent mass protests over racial justice.

It also would come as the conservative-dominated court agreed this week to hear cases [challenging race-conscious college admissions programs](#), raising the possibility that it may ban affirmative action policies aimed at maintaining racial diversity.

Mr. Biden's political support has been especially strong among Black women. New York Times exit polling data from the 2020 election showed that while they made up just 8 percent of the electorate, they were Mr. Biden's most lopsided supporters: [90 percent of Black female voters cast their ballots for him](#).

And in Georgia, Mr. Biden's win was followed by Democrats sweeping a pair of crucial runoff elections for Senate seats that gave the party razor-thin control of the Senate — and with it the ability to confirm judges without needing any Republican support.

Several factors went into those narrow wins that flipped the state blue, but one was that a [group of Black female organizers](#) — most famously Stacey Abrams, the former candidate for governor who founded a voter registration group called the New Georgia Project — had been working to register hundreds of thousands new voters and encourage them to turn out.

For Democrats, maintaining enthusiastic support among Black voters, and especially Black women, may be critical in November's midterm elections. Democratic activists urged Mr. Biden on Wednesday not to back down from his promise.

"There would be little to no rationale for President Biden to miss this opportunity," Aimee Allison, the president of She the People, a liberal advocacy group, said in a statement. "It is and could be a defining moment for his presidency."

Polls show Democrats trailing in their efforts to keep control of the House and the Senate, and Mr. Biden has had a rocky first year, in part because the Senate filibuster rule means Republicans can block much of his agenda, like passage of a social spending bill and an expansion of federal protections for voting rights.

But since the Senate abolished the filibuster for judges — Democrats did so for lower and appellate court judges in 2013, and Republicans did so for Supreme Court justices in 2017 — a party that controls both the White House and the Senate by any margin can appoint life-tenured federal judges, including to fill any vacancies among the 179 federal appellate seats.

In April, when Mr. Biden announced his first three appeals court nominees, all three were Black women with Ivy League educations, including Judge Jackson. Two more of the next 10 appellate judges he appointed are also Black women. And of his six appellate nominees still pending before the Senate, three are Black women.

Mr. Biden's decision to use his power to place numerous Black women on the bench — as well as in district court judgeships and [high-profile roles in the executive branch](#) — is transformative considering the many decades during which they have rarely exercised power in the legal system.

The history of Black female judges mirrors the larger story of African Americans since the Civil War, according to a 2010 article in the Howard Law Journal by Anna Blackburne-Rigsby, who is the chief judge of the District of Columbia Court of Appeals.

"Black women judges came to the 'judicial' table much later than Black men (by more than 80 years) and also much later than white women (by almost 60 years)," she wrote in the article, "[Black Women Judges: The Historical Journey of Black Women to the Nation's Highest Courts](#)."

New York City did not have its first Black female judge until 1939, when Jane Matilda Bolin was appointed to the Domestic Relations Court, Judge Blackburne-Rigsby wrote, adding that when the city's mayor, Fiorello H. LaGuardia, appointed Ms. Bolin, he first consulted her husband — a sign of the times and of the limits placed on Black women in the court system.

Judge Blackburne-Rigsby declined to comment on Wednesday. But in her article, she sounded a note of caution about viewing that demographic's slow rise to judicial power as a matter of numbers alone.

	<p>“Being both Black and female brings an important additional voice to the deliberative process,” she wrote, “but that voice is varied because there is no singular ‘Black woman’ perspective.”</p> <p>Even after the civil rights movement in the 1960s, which included President Lyndon B. Johnson’s appointment of Thurgood Marshall as the first Black Supreme Court justice in 1967, Black women’s access to the levers of judicial power remained limited.</p> <p>In 1966, Mr. Johnson had also appointed the first Black female federal judge — Constance Baker Motley, whom he placed in the Southern District of New York.</p> <p>And in the years that followed, Judge Motley was sometimes mentioned as a potential future Supreme Court justice, said Tomiko Brown-Nagin, a Harvard legal historian who published a biography of the judge this week, “Civil Rights Queen.”</p> <p>But Ms. Brown-Nagin, who is also the dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, said that while Judge Motley was “eminently qualified” for elevation, her political window closed: As a former civil rights lawyer, she was seen as a liberal, and from 1969 until 1993, there was no Supreme Court vacancy while a Democrat was president.</p> <p>“This appointment has been a long time coming,” Ms. Brown-Nagin said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/27 Asian shares plunge lowest levels in 15yrs
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jan/27/asian-shares-fall-to-lowest-in-15-months-after-us-fed-nails-on-march-rate-rise
GIST	<p>Stock markets in Asia have tumbled to their lowest in nearly 15 months after America’s central bank chief confirmed widely expected plans to tackle higher inflation with an increase in interest rates this year, beginning in March.</p> <p>With investors also concerned about political tensions between Russia and Ukraine, supply chain problems and rising oil prices, the prospect of sustained increases in the cost of borrowing by the world’s most powerful economy sent a spasm of anxiety through financial markets on Thursday.</p> <p>“The Fed’s gone from being the market’s best friend, to a possible enemy,” said Kyle Rodda, analyst at the online trading platform IG in Sydney, adding that the Fed was set on “bringing inflation down, rather than protecting asset prices”.</p> <p>The Nikkei in Japan led the way as it closed down more than 3% while the Kospi in Seoul found itself losing 3.5% of its value in a turbulent session. The market in Hong Kong finished off by 2.42% and Sydney shed nearly 2% to enter a technical correction. after shedding 10% from its most recent high.</p> <p>MSCI’s broad gauge of regional markets outside Japan fell 2.7% to its lowest level since November 2020.</p> <p>The drop echoed a sharp reversal in US shares on Wednesday. The S&P 500 closed 0.14% lower and the Nasdaq Composite finished barely higher, erasing a rise of more than 3.4%. The Dow Jones average slipped 0.38%.</p> <p>The FTSE100 is set to fall nearly 2% when it opens on Thursday morning, according to futures trade, with the Wall Street markets also heading for a hefty loss.</p> <p>Mike Kelly, head of global multi-asset at PineBridge Investments in the US, said it was a sign to “get the heck out” of US stocks. “It’s all about selling longer duration assets,” he said, “so we are underexposed to US equities.”</p>

In its [latest policy update on Wednesday](#), the US Federal Reserve chairman, Jerome Powell, indicated the central bank was likely to raise interest rates in March, and reaffirmed plans to end its Covid-emergency bond purchases that month before launching a significant reduction in its asset holdings.

But in the follow-up press conference, Powell warned that inflation – which has hit levels not seen for decades – remains above the Fed’s long-run goal and supply chain issues may be more persistent than previously thought.

“There was a marked shift in terms of a relatively dovish statement and then a relatively hawkish press conference,” said David Chao, global market strategist, Asia Pacific at Invesco.

“Powell is not committing to the size or the frequency of rate hikes and also the timing of the balance sheet reduction. I think that buys him a bit of wriggle room as to how quickly and with what velocity he wants to normalise monetary policy in the US.”

Chao said, however, that any further rise in inflation in the US, which is now running at 7%, could lead to “a more aggressive monetary policy tightening” meaning more US rate hikes.

A tougher stance by the Fed is expected to see [other central banks drop into line or continue to increase rates](#), such as in the Bank of England’s case, which increased borrowing costs in December to curb rising consumer prices. The central bank in South Korea has already hiked rates three times in six months.

“With the somewhat hawkish signals by the Fed ... there may be greater pressure for central banks to act on curbing inflationary pressures as well,” wrote Yeap Jun Rong, market strategist at IG. Earlier this week, Singapore’s central bank surprised markets by tightening its monetary policy settings in its first out-of-cycle move in seven years.

The US dollar rose on Thursday on the back of higher US bond yields, lifting the dollar index – which measures the greenback against major peers – to 96.604, near five-week highs. The pound slipped to \$1.343.

The global benchmark Brent crude fell 0.64% on profit-taking to \$89.38 per barrel.

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HEADLINE	01/26 WA to pause long-term care program, tax
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/WA-Legislature-OKs-pause-to-long-term-care-16807349.php
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — The Washington state Legislature on Wednesday fast-tracked a delay of the implementation of a long-term care program — and the payroll tax that pays for it — to address solvency concerns and other issues raised about the first-in-the-nation defined benefit.</p> <p>The bipartisan 46-3 vote in the Democratic-controlled Senate comes a week after the House passed the delay on a 91-6 vote. It now heads to Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee, who is expected to sign the measure Friday.</p> <p>Because the bill has an emergency clause, it would immediately take effect and delay the payroll tax — which was supposed to start being collected by employers this month — until July 1, 2023 and would refund any premiums that were collected before that date. Collection of the benefit to pay for things like in-home care, home modifications like wheelchair ramps and rides to the doctor would be delayed from Jan. 1, 2025 until July 1, 2026.</p> <p>Additionally, people born before Jan. 1, 1968 who do not become vested in the program because they do not pay the premium for 10 years could qualify for partial benefits under the bill.</p> <p>Democratic Senate Majority Leader Andy Billig called the underlying law an important program that’s “going to help Washingtonians age in place, which we know is important for the quality of their life.”</p>

“But with such an important and impactful program and especially one that is so innovative, it makes sense to take the time to get it exactly right,” he said. “We’ve been listening. And what we’ve heard are a lot of good ideas on how to make this program better.”

The lifetime maximum of the benefit is \$36,500, with annual increases to be determined based on inflation, and the program is funded by workers, who will pay a premium of .58% of total pay per paycheck.

The benefit is not portable, so people who pay into the program but later move out of state will not be able to access it, and it only covers the taxpayer, not a spouse or dependent.

While a majority of Republicans in both chambers voted for the delay, they did so while arguing that the program should be repealed so that the state could focus on working to make private industry plans more affordable for those who want to buy them.

“The math doesn’t work,” said Republican Sen. John Braun. “This is not political. This is just a good idea that doesn’t work.”

Under an update to the law passed by the Legislature last year, people who wanted to opt out of the state-managed program had to have a private long-term care insurance plan in place before Nov. 1, 2021 and then apply for an exemption.

Modeling by the consulting firm Milliman in December 2020 showed various scenarios of opt-out structures, with the baseline one finding that 3% of wage earners responsible for about 10% of wages in 2022 would opt out at the start of the program. Under that scenario, a premium assessment of .66% would be required to keep the program solvent through 2096.

More than 460,000 people — or approximately 13% of the state’s workforce — have opted out of the program.

Another bill that cleared the Legislature following a 38-11 vote in the Senate Wednesday would allow people who work in Washington but live in other states to opt out, along with spouses or partners of active military members and temporary workers with nonimmigrant visas.

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HEADLINE	01/26 WA paid family leave program short cash
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/washington-states-paid-family-leave-program-running-short-on-cash/
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA — Washington state’s paid family leave program could hit a deficit as early as March and there are concerns about long-term solvency following a significant increase in demand for the benefit that launched in 2020.</p> <p>Under the law, eligible workers receive 12 weeks paid time off for the birth or adoption of a child or for a serious medical condition of the worker or the worker’s family member, or 16 weeks for a combination of both. An additional two weeks may be used if there is a serious health condition with a pregnancy.</p> <p>Weekly benefits are calculated based on a percentage of the employee’s wages and the state’s weekly average wage — which is now \$1,475 — though the weekly amount paid out is capped at \$1,327.</p> <p>The program saw benefit delays when it went live in January 2020, right before the pandemic hit. In the first six weeks, more than triple the number of people expected applied for the program, and the demand has continued to be high.</p>

Since the start of the program, the Employment Security Department has processed more than 365,000 individual applications and has paid out more than 2.2 million weekly claims.

When premiums started in 2019, 0.4% of workers' wages funded the program, with 63% paid by employees and 37% paid by employers. But that rate increased on Jan. 1 to 0.6% of workers' wages, and employees' share increased to 73%, with the remainder paid by employers. That's because a provision in the law that dictates how much of the rate will be allocated to employees is based on the ratio of family leave claims increasing compared to medical leave claims.

As of this week, more than 37% of total applications have been for bonding with a new child, more than 50% were for someone dealing with a serious health condition, and nearly 12% have been for caring for a family member with a serious health condition.

Officials with the ESD told lawmakers at a Senate Ways & Means Committee hearing last week that since the cash influx from the tax rate increase won't be available until the end of the first quarter, there are concerns about the fund's solvency and a deficit was likely soon.

Under the law, an additional solvency surcharge of at least .1% could ultimately be added to the current rate if the account balance falls below a certain range.

"Because of the popularity of the program and the amount of benefits paid we've seen the fund balance continue to go down," said Carole Holland, the chief financial officer for the agency. "And so it does seem that it's likely that we will have a cash deficit situation in March or April of 2022."

Holland said it was difficult to know if the pandemic caused additional strain on the fund, since the benefit started right at the beginning of it, but lawmakers said they want additional details.

"I suspect that the huge hit that we took with COVID had a lot to do with the increase in paid family leave," Democratic Sen. Karen Keiser said at the hearing. Keiser has introduced a bill that would lower the employee share from 73% to 42% without raising the rate on business, instead allocating state funds to make up the difference.

Holland said that the agency plans to bring an actuary on board in March to help refine projections and to provide options for potentially changing the rate structure. Also, Gov. Jay Inslee's budget proposal last month included \$82 million to allow a transfer to the paid family leave account if there's a deficit "so that we can have continuity of benefit payments in the event that we run out of cash," she said.

She said that ideally the state would have three months of reserves, something that does not exist at this point, but that the governor's proposal would provide about a month buffer. Holland said the state paid about \$90 million in benefits in November, and a little less in December.

According to the agency, as of Jan. 22 the program's balance was \$78.7 million.

Republican Sen. Lynda Wilson said it was disappointing "how we didn't anticipate what could happen."

"I think we really do need to know those details on how COVID affected this," she said. "Because if this is ongoing, this program isn't sustainable. We've got real problems."

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HEADLINE	01/26 WA probe shuts 'Sold by Amazon' program
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/sold-by-amazon-program-shut-down-after-wa-attorney-generals-antitrust-investigation/
GIST	Amazon is shutting down its "Sold by Amazon" program after an investigation from Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson found it was anticompetitive and violated antitrust laws.

The company engaged in unlawful price fixing and unreasonably restrained competition in order to maximize its own profits, according to the lawsuit and consent decree filed Wednesday in King County Superior Court.

As a result of the investigation, Amazon will shut down the program nationwide and pay \$2.25 million to the attorney general's office, as well as provide annual updates on its compliance with antitrust laws. The funds will go toward antitrust enforcement.

The program ran from 2018 to 2020, when Amazon suspended it for reasons unrelated to the investigation, according to a spokesperson for the company. It was a small program offering another tool to businesses, the spokesperson said, and did not include all of the third-party sellers on the e-commerce platform.

Through the program, third-party sellers entered into an agreement with Amazon that set a minimum payment rate for products sold on the platform, according to the lawsuit. If the sales exceeded the agreed upon minimum, Amazon would take a cut of the additional revenue.

A spokesperson for Amazon said the company believes the program was legal and good for consumers. Amazon acted as the retailer and purchased products from suppliers to fill a customer order, ensuring low prices for consumers.

But, Ferguson's investigation concluded, the program boosted Amazon's sales and ensured it didn't have to compete with third-party sellers.

"Consumers lose when corporate giants like Amazon fix prices to increase their profits," Ferguson said Wednesday. "Today's action promotes product innovation and consumer choice, and makes the market more competitive for sellers in Washington state and across the country."

Competing with Amazon seemed inevitable for many sellers, according to a 2021 report from Jungle Scout, a company that works to help entrepreneurs and brands grow on Amazon. Half of third-party sellers on the platform said Amazon sold products that directly competed with their own.

Prices for many products enrolled in the program "stabilized at artificially high levels," according to a release from Ferguson's office Wednesday.

Amazon also used an algorithm to match prices to certain external retailers, leading to price increases for some third-party sellers, and a decline in sales as customers opted for Amazon's own brand of products, the lawsuit alleged.

Ferguson opened a formal investigation in March 2020 and Amazon suspended the program that June, according to a spokesperson for the attorney general.

When Amazon first started to invite third-party sellers to try the new Sold by Amazon program, some sellers were skeptical of the business model, said Dave Bryant, an Amazon seller for nearly 10 years and a part The Ecomcrew, which runs a blog and podcast to monitor the e-commerce giant.

After getting an invite for some of his company's best-selling products, Bryant remembers the "pretty widely felt sentiment was this cannot be a good idea to allow Amazon to control our pricing."

"Almost everyone I talked to said this doesn't seem right," he said. "Normally, when you let the foxes run the hen house, the hens get eaten."

Bryant opted out of the program.

Amazon tends to roll out new marketing initiatives for third-party sellers just about every quarter, Bryant said, many of them invite-only based on top-selling products and most with an option to opt in or out.

“That’s the challenge of being a seller,” he said. “You never know which are good for sellers and which are good for Amazon — and which ones are going to stick as well.”

Amazon said it discontinued the Sold by Amazon program in 2020 for business reasons that were not related to the attorney general’s investigation.

“This was a small program to provide another tool to help sellers offer lower prices, much like similar programs common among other retailers, that has since been discontinued,” a spokesperson said. “While we strongly believe the program was legal, we’re glad to have this matter resolved.”

Like many of the tech giants, Amazon has faced several allegations of anticompetitive behavior and violations of antitrust law. In January 2021, consumers filed a lawsuit against Amazon in a U.S. District Court in New York, accusing the company of using anticompetitive contracts to drive up the cost of e-books.

Later that year, District of Columbia Attorney General Karl Racine sued Amazon for fixing online retail prices through contract provisions and policies for third-party sellers. In that case, Racine alleged Amazon had prevented third-party sellers from offering their products at lower prices on any other online platform, including their own website.

According to an October report from the company, Amazon had nearly 2 million small- and medium-sized businesses as third-party selling partners. The price to sell on the platform varies based on things like the company’s product category and its fulfillment strategy.

In 2020, Amazon generated \$80.5 billion in third-party seller services, according to market and consumer data firm Statista. Third-party sales account for more than 50% of sales on Amazon.

Washington ranks among the top 10 states with the fastest-growing rate of third-party sellers on the digital marketplace, Ferguson said.

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HEADLINE	01/25 Navy \$13B carrier combat defenseless?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/navys-13-billion-carrier-sows-doubt-that-it-can-defend-itself/
GIST	<p>The combat system for the Navy’s newest and costliest warship, the \$13 billion Gerald R. Ford, “has yet to demonstrate that it can effectively” defend the aircraft carrier from anti-ship missiles and other threats, according to a new assessment by the Pentagon’s testing office.</p> <p>Mixed performance by missile interceptors, radar and data dissemination systems on a testing vessel limited the ability to destroy replicas of incoming weapons even though sensor systems “satisfactorily detected, tracked and engaged the targets,” according to the report obtained by Bloomberg News in advance of its release.</p> <p>The carrier built by Huntington Ingalls Industries Inc. is still dogged as well by the “poor or unknown reliability” of its aircraft launch and recovery systems, according to the five-page report. And recent shock tests to assess the vulnerability of key systems “identified several design shortfalls not previously discovered,” the testing office said. It said “the Navy has already identified several survivability” opportunities to improve the four-carrier class of ships “against underwater threat engagements.”</p> <p>The persistent shortcomings undercut the Navy’s hope to showcase the Ford as the first in a new class of nuclear-powered carriers that can project U.S. power globally and are more combat-capable, reliable and</p>

affordable to operate than the Nimitz class it's replacing. The latest assessment raises new questions for Pentagon officials and lawmakers about how fully the Navy will demonstrate improvements before the Ford is deployed in mid-September on its first patrol with aircraft and escort vessels.

The report, which contains unclassified and "controlled unclassified" information and has been circulated to the Navy, found that "only a limited assessment" of the combat system's effectiveness is possible at this point. It said Nickolas Guertin, the new head of the testing office, plans to send Congress an interim report on the Ford's self-defense capabilities by Sept. 30.

The Naval Sea Systems Command said in a statement that it "welcomed the opportunity to review and provide comment on" the assessment draft. "Overall," it said, recent post-delivery testing of the Ford "indicate the risk of system reliability impacting mission accomplishment is decreasing."

Chinese challenge

Answering concerns about the Ford's defense system — with its dual-band radar, data fusion and other advanced capabilities — takes on added urgency as China increases its inventory of patrol boats, frigates, cruisers and conventional submarines with advanced anti-ship cruise missiles.

The Navy's three tests so far of the Ford's self-defense system on board a specialized vessel designed to evaluate performance were "not adequate to assess the combat system's capability against supersonic antiship cruise missiles and subsonic maneuvering missiles, and there were no future test events planned against threats that could provide additional data," according to the testing office.

The vessel's Gatling gun-like system "experienced numerous reliability failures that in several cases prevented the system from executing its mission," the test office said.

After a series of additional evaluations and exercises with the Ford's air wing, the plan is for the carrier to "to visit multiple theaters of operation with multiple allies" by the end of summer, Rear Admiral James Downey, the Navy's program executive officer for aircraft carriers, told reporters Friday.

He said the Navy is confident in the vessel's combat systems. "She's been engaged against her required threats and we've done those tests at sea, they've been evaluated and she's achieved her certification in the combat systems area," Downey said.

Lingering questions

The testing office said the Ford is unlikely to achieve its goal for the number of sorties it can launch over a 24-hour period, saying it's "based on unrealistic assumptions."

It also said that during 8,157 takeoffs and recoveries through last year, the carrier's new electromagnetic catapult system made by General Atomics demonstrated a reliability of 272 launches "between operational mission failure," or "well below" its required 4,166. Similarly, its system to snag landing aircraft demonstrated a 41-landing reliability rate "well below the requirement of 16,500," the testing office said.

The Naval Sea Systems Command said that during the Ford's recent at-sea phase, the carrier "completed all required testing, accomplished work ahead of plan, improved system reliability for new technologies and served as an East Coast platform for conducting pilot carrier qualifications for over 400 newly qualified and re-qualifying pilots."

More than 8,100 launch and landing operations "highlighted the Ford's increasing capability and provide growing confidence that a fully trained Ford crew and embarked air wing will achieve the required sorties generation rate," the command said.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Seattle's post-5pm sunsets are here
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/seattles-post-5-p-m-sunsets-are-here/

<p>GIST</p>	<p>Today may not seem like a special day. But you are mistaken. Wednesday marks the first day of the year when the sun will set after 5 p.m. — and that’s reason enough to celebrate in Seattle.</p> <p>So go forth and enjoy the day’s 9 hours and 18 minutes of daylight and be assured the “Big Dark” is gradually coming to an end. Your afternoon will no longer consist of staring longingly at the sun as it dips below the horizon, or more realistically, watching the sky darken as it drizzles.</p> <p>While it has only been about a month since the winter solstice on Dec. 21, there’s more good news for anyone else missing the sun: We’re six weeks away from sunsets after 7 p.m.</p> <p>Daylight saving time begins March 13, when we’ll all turn our clocks one hour forward. That day, the sun will set at 7:12 p.m.</p> <p>Soon, post-work walks, runs and bike rides will be within our reach. Perhaps, meeting up with friends after work won’t mean huddling around a heater, but instead, enjoying a sunset.</p> <p>December and January in Seattle are infamously gloomy with high cloud cover and little daylight. The darkest day in Seattle typically has 8.5 hours of daylight, according to the website timeanddate.com.</p> <p>Before you know it, the spring equinox will be here on March 20, when the sun will rise at 7:11 a.m. and set at 7:22 p.m., and more daylight will be upon us. The last time the sun set around 5 p.m. in Seattle was Nov. 7, just after daylight saving time ended.</p>
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<p>HEADLINE</p>	<p>01/26 Hikes affect mortgages, loans, rates?</p>
<p>SOURCE</p>	<p>https://www.seattletimes.com/business/how-fed-hikes-could-affect-mortgages-car-loans-card-rates/</p>
<p>GIST</p>	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — Will mortgage rates go up? How about car loans? Credit cards? How about those nearly invisible rates on bank CDs — any chance of getting a few dollars more?</p> <p>With the Federal Reserve signaling Wednesday that it will begin raising its benchmark interest rate as soon as March — and probably a few additional times this year — consumers and businesses will eventually feel it.</p> <p>The Fed’s thinking is that with America’s job market essentially back to normal and inflation surging well beyond the central bank’s annual 2% target, now is the time to raise its benchmark rate from near zero.</p> <p>The Fed had slashed its key rate after the pandemic recession erupted two years ago. The idea was to support the economy by encouraging borrowing and spending. But now, by making loans gradually costlier, the Fed hopes to stem the surging price increases that have been squeezing consumers and businesses.</p> <p>Here are some questions on what this could mean for consumers and businesses.</p> <p>—</p> <p>I’M CONSIDERING BUYING A HOUSE. WILL MORTGAGE RATES GO STEADILY HIGHER?</p> <p>Probably, but it’s hard to say. Mortgage rates don’t usually rise in tandem with the Fed’s rate increases. Sometimes they even move in the opposite direction. Long-term mortgages tend to track the rate on the 10-year Treasury, which, in turn, is influenced by a variety of factors. These include investors’ expectations for future inflation and global demand for U.S. Treasuries.</p> <p>When inflation is expected to stay high, investors tend to sell Treasuries because the yields on those bonds tend to provide little to no return once you account for inflation. As that happens, the selling pressure on the bonds tends to force Treasuries to pay higher rates. Yields then rise in response. The result can be higher mortgage rates. But not always.</p>

DOES THAT MEAN HOME-LOAN RATES WON'T RISE MUCH ANYTIME SOON?

Not necessarily. Inflation is far exceeding the Fed's 2 percent target. Fewer investors are buying Treasuries as a safe haven. And with numerous Fed rate hikes expected, the rate on the 10-year note could rise over time — and so, by extension, would mortgage rates.

It's just hard to say when.

On the other hand, even when Treasury yields are comparatively low relative to inflation, as they are now, investors often still flock to them. That's especially true at times of global turmoil. Nervous investors from around the world often pour money into Treasuries because they are regarded as ultra-safe. All that buying pressure tends to keep a lid on Treasury rates, which generally has the effect of keeping mortgage rates relatively low.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER KINDS OF LOANS?

For users of credit cards, home equity lines of credit and other variable-interest debt, rates would rise by roughly the same amount as the Fed hike. That's because those rates are based in part on banks' prime rate, which moves in tandem with the Fed.

Those who don't qualify for such low-rate credit card offers might be stuck paying higher interest on their balances, because the rates on their cards would rise as the prime rate does.

The Fed's rate hikes won't necessarily raise auto loan rates. Car loans tend to be more sensitive to competition, which can slow the rate of increases.

WOULD I FINALLY EARN A BETTER-THAN-MEASLY RETURN ON CDS AND MONEY MARKET ACCOUNTS?

Probably, though it would take time.

Savings, certificates of deposit and money market accounts don't typically track the Fed's changes. Instead, banks tend to capitalize on a higher-rate environment to try to thicken their profits. They do so by imposing higher rates on borrowers, without necessarily offering any juicier rates to savers.

The exception: Banks with high-yield savings accounts. These accounts are known for aggressively competing for depositors. The only catch is that they typically require significant deposits.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Families 737 MAX crashes ask DOJ for help
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/families-of-crash-victims-ask-us-to-reopen-boeing-settlement/
GIST	<p>Relatives of passengers who died in crashes of Boeing 737 MAX jets are pressing Attorney General Merrick Garland to help them re-open a settlement that shielded Boeing from criminal prosecution for misleading federal safety regulators about the plane.</p> <p>Several family members and their lawyers held a video meeting Wednesday with Garland. They told the attorney general that the Justice Department violated a federal law by not informing them before finalizing the settlement in January 2021, two weeks before the Trump administration left office.</p> <p>Garland expressed sympathy to relatives who spoke during the meeting but made no promises or substantive comments on the case, according to participants.</p> <p>Last month, the families of more than a dozen passengers filed a motion in federal court in Fort Worth, Texas, alleging that the Justice Department violated a 2004 victims' rights law by not consulting with them before reaching the settlement, which shielded Boeing from criminal prosecution. They are also seeking documents that the department gathered during its investigation.</p>

Michael Stumo, whose 24-year-old daughter Samya was killed in the 2019 crash of an Ethiopian Airlines Max, said passengers' relatives were blindsided and "erupted in anger, shock and renewed grief" when the settlement was announced.

"We don't think they could have gotten this deal through if they had allowed us to have any input and knowledge," he said.

Stumo and two relatives of other passengers spoke during the meeting. Their lawyer, Paul Cassell, a former federal judge, argued that failing to inform families ahead of time made the settlement illegal.

They asked Garland to support their legal argument that the Trump administration's Justice Department violated a crime-victims' law. Cassell believes that if a court accepts that argument, it could invalidate the agreement. The family members, however, stopped short of asking Garland for a specific outcome, such as whether negotiations with Boeing should start over.

Several high-ranking Justice Department officials in Washington and Texas also attended the meeting. The department did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Boeing also declined to comment.

In all, 346 people were killed in two MAX crashes, the first in Indonesia in 2018, and another five months later in Ethiopia. All MAX jets were grounded worldwide for nearly two years. They were cleared to fly again after Boeing overhauled an automated flight-control system that activated erroneously in both crashes.

In the January 2021 settlement, Boeing blamed two former test pilots for misleading the Federal Aviation Administration about the flight-control system before regulators approved the plane in 2017. The Justice Department agreed to drop a criminal charge of conspiracy to defraud the government if Boeing follows terms of the deal for three years.

Nearly \$1.8 billion of the settlement money was set aside for airlines that lost money because their planes were grounded. Another \$500 million went into a fund for victims' relatives, and Boeing agreed to pay a \$243.6 million fine.

Naoise Connolly Ryan, whose husband Mick died in the second crash, called the deal "a slap on the wrist that wrongly holds no executive accountable." She also spoke to Garland during Wednesday's meeting.

Since the settlement, one of the former Boeing test pilots, Mark Forkner, has been charged with fraud.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Boeing reports deep loss for 787 rework
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/boeing-reports-a-net-loss-in-2021-as-the-cost-of-the-787-delivery-halt-soars-to-5-5-billion/
GIST	<p>The cost to Boeing of the prolonged stoppage in 787 Dreamliner jet deliveries due to the discovery of manufacturing quality flaws that require extensive rework has soared to \$5.5 billion and produced deep fourth-quarter financial losses, the company disclosed Wednesday.</p> <p>"None of us like charges. It's a big one," Boeing CEO Dave Calhoun said on CNBC after the financial results were released. "But it reflects our reality with respect to the 787 delays."</p> <p>In an internal memo to employees Wednesday morning, Calhoun said he views the 787 financial hit as "a long-term investment." He expressed confidence in the future of the 787, saying it's a jet program with "significant runway ahead."</p> <p>In a note to investors after the earnings details came out, Wall Street analyst Rob Stallard of Vertical Research was skeptical.</p>

“Just as we saw with the 737 MAX, Boeing is now racking up massive charges on the 787 with no firm end in sight, and its fate in the hands of the FAA,” Stallard wrote.

Calhoun announced no firm timeline for an end to the unprecedented 787 delivery stoppage. However he hinted that deliveries might resume as soon as April.

Boeing also reported a separate \$402 million write-off in the fourth quarter on the KC-46 Air Force tanker program.

The good news in the quarterly results was that 737 MAX production has ramped up to 26 jets per month and Boeing Chief Financial Officer Brian West said the Renton assembly plant is on track “fairly soon” to reach Boeing’s target of rolling out 31 MAXs per month.

And the cash brought in for delivering those MAXs produced Boeing’s first positive quarterly cash flow in nearly three years, stemming the cash bleed that’s been gushing out since the first quarter of 2019.

No profits on the 787

The 787 Dreamliner charges included a \$3.5 billion write-off to cover what Boeing will have to pay as compensation to airlines for the delivery delays that it says extend further than previously anticipated.

In addition, Boeing is absorbing another \$2 billion in abnormal 787 manufacturing costs resulting from the low production rate and the rework on previously completed airplanes.

Boeing said most of those costs will be incurred through the next two years, with \$285 million recorded in the fourth quarter.

That’s up from Boeing’s [estimate in the fall that fixing the 787 manufacturing flaws would add about \\$1 billion](#) in abnormal manufacturing costs.

The write-off acknowledges that the 787 program now won’t cover the accumulated costs of producing the jet.

Even excluding the massively swollen cost of developing the jet between 2003 and 2011 — [estimated at north of \\$15 billion](#) — and considering only production costs since then, Boeing is conceding that the 787 won’t be profitable in the foreseeable future.

Analyst Nick Cunningham of Agency Partners in the U.K. wrote to investors Wednesday that “the 787 issue keeps on expanding and extending in duration.”

Dreamliner deliveries initially halted in fall 2020 when [engineers discovered unacceptable gaps between fuselage sections](#). A few deliveries resumed in March 2021, only to stop again in May as the Federal Aviation Administration raised questions about Boeing’s plan for inspecting the airplanes for the defects.

In October, an Italian 787 supplier was found to have [installed faulty titanium parts](#). In November, the FAA cataloged [a growing litany of 787 defects that needed investigation](#), including small gaps in the structure surrounding the passenger and cargo doors.

CFO West said that at the end of 2021, a total of 110 completed Dreamliners were parked in storage awaiting delivery.

He said the rework on every one of those aircraft includes a “pretty labor-intensive rework solution on the door surrounds.”

Rather than stipulate a time frame when it expects 787 deliveries to resume, Calhoun said that Boeing will take the time needed to get it right and wait for approval from the FAA.

“While we never want to disappoint our customers or miss expectations, the work we’re putting in now will build stability and predictability going forward,” Calhoun wrote in his memo to employees.

Analysts have cautioned investors that 787 deliveries may not resume in the first half of this year. Last week, American Airlines and United Airlines during their quarterly earnings calls gave their expectations on taking delivery of 787s.

United’s executive vice president, Gerry Laderman, said he doesn’t expect to receive any until “after the summer.” American’s chief financial officer, Derek Kerr, was more optimistic when he specified “mid-April” for that airline’s next delivery.

While both Calhoun and West declined to offer formal guidance on timing, Calhoun told analysts the airlines know everything Boeing knows and he indicated that the American Airlines estimate of mid-April is reasonable.

Another charge on the tanker program

Meanwhile, Boeing’s Air Force KC-46 tanker program continues to be a loss maker.

West said one part of the write-off on the tanker program stems from the growing cost of fixing the jet’s remote vision system.

That’s the technology that allows the operator of the refueling boom inside the tanker to see on a computer screen the approaching jet fighter that is lining up behind the tanker to be refueled in midair.

Another factor contributing to additional tanker costs, West said, was disruption to the supply chain during the coronavirus pandemic.

The latest charge brings the total of Boeing’s tanker-program write-offs since 2014 to \$5.4 billion, expenses the company must cover itself under the terms of the fixed-price firm contract it won in 2011.

Asked about the chaotic impact on the airlines of the rollout of 5G cellphone service last week, Calhoun on CNBC expressed optimism that the industry can soon solve the signal interference problem that has led to flight cancellations, though more affecting smaller airplanes rather than Boeing jets.

“We are working on technical solutions that I think will soften and dampen this to the point where it won’t be noticed,” Calhoun said.

All the charges in the fourth quarter led to a net loss of \$4.2 billion, or \$7.02 per share, for the quarter. And for third straight year that brought Boeing an overall loss for 2021.

The net loss for the year was \$4.3 billion, or \$7.15 per share.

Revenue for the fourth quarter was \$14.8 billion.

Primarily because of lower quarterly revenue in Boeing’s defense and space unit, that was down 3% from a year ago. And in a disappointment to Wall Street, it was 11% below what analysts had projected, according to S&P Global Market Intelligence.

Total revenue for 2021 was \$62.3 billion, up 7% from 2020.

Cash flow from operations was \$716 million in the fourth quarter. In the same quarter last year, Boeing saw a cash outflow of \$4 billion.

Free cash flow, which is cash from operations minus expenditure on plant and equipment, was \$494 million in the quarter compared to negative \$507 million the previous quarter.

“We’ve restructured operations, we’ve returned the MAX to service ... and as a result, we got our head above water with respect to free cash flow,” Calhoun said on CNBC. “I feel very good about that progress.”

West said Boeing still has 335 MAXs parked in inventory since the grounding that lifted at the end of 2020. West said he anticipates most of those will be delivered “by the end of 2023.”

With deliveries of those stored planes added to new planes fresh off the assembly line, West said Boeing should deliver about 500 MAXs this year.

In another move that should increase cash flow, West said that because of the current high demand for cargo jets, Boeing plans to increase production of the 777 this year from two airplanes per month to three.

After repaying one loan, Boeing’s net debt fell from \$42.4 billion the previous quarter to \$41.9 billion at year end.

Boeing’s share price sank almost 5% Wednesday, dropping \$9.83 to close at \$194.27.

All the charges wrapped up in the last quarter’s results suggested a management attempt to pile the costs of the bad news as much as possible into last year, so that Boeing has a better chance of showing some profit in 2022, for the first time since 2018.

In a statement, Calhoun called 2021 “a rebuilding year.”

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HEADLINE	01/26 Beijing Olympics Russia Covid challenge
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/beijing-olympics-roc-covid-11643220111?mod=hp_lead_pos11
GIST	<p>With the Beijing Olympics barely a week away, one team is on the leading edge of demonstrating the pandemic-related complications that may lie ahead: the Russian Olympic Committee.</p> <p>Positive Covid-19 tests are mounting among Russian athletes, threatening the participation of stars across figure skating, hockey and sliding sports in a country whose sports programs have barely acknowledged the virus—until now. At least five positive results have been reported as of Wednesday.</p> <p>Throughout the pandemic, Russia has pushed ahead with full-scale sports events, in which few participants have been masked even when not competing. Athletes have frequently been described as having pneumonia or undisclosed illnesses rather than Covid-19. Only half of the athletes representing the Russian Olympic Committee in Tokyo had been vaccinated.</p> <p>Now, the Russian Olympic Committee is attempting to pull off something even more risky. While it says most of its Beijing athletes are vaccinated, Russian officials say that the vaccination requirement for these Games does not extend to teenagers—a group that includes three figure-skating stars who could sweep the women’s podium. Russia says it can still bring them to the Games without either having been vaccinated or spending 21 days in quarantine, as required for almost everyone else by the Beijing organizers.</p> <p>Russian sports officials say they have secured a special exemption for their underage skaters, even though Russia approved its vaccines for teenagers late last year.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Covid cases are already mounting elsewhere on the team—which again will compete as the Russian Olympic Committee, without the country’s name, flag or anthem, as part of a multiyear punishment for state-sanctioned doping.</p> <p>When the withdrawal of men’s figure skater Mikhail Kolyada and the possible Covid-related ouster of skeleton racer Nikita Tregubov were announced Tuesday, it rattled an already on-edge cohort of winter</p>

sports competitors [trying to train and travel to Beijing while ducking the highly transmissible Omicron variant](#).

Then on Wednesday, Russian bobsled officials said that team members Aleksei Pushkarev and Vasiliy Kondratenko have also tested positive and are currently isolating. Another positive test came from ice dancer Egor Bazin, who is part of the skating team as an alternate, state newswire TASS reported.

Meanwhile, the Russian hockey federation said that center Artem Anisimov was also positive and is training on his own.

The athletes all got their positive results while they were still in Russia. That provides the barest of silver linings, as it allows for them to possibly prove they have recovered and travel to Beijing, or for alternates to be sent in their place.

For many delegations, the prospect of athletes testing positive after they get to China is particularly grim—for concerns over their welfare, but also for competition. The logistics of getting athletes to China under “zero-Covid” policies make the prospect of late substitutions almost impossible to conceive.

The Russian Olympic Committee, the Figure Skating Federation and the Bobsleigh Federation didn’t respond to requests for comment.

[Covid ripped through Russian figure skating in late 2020](#). But at the time, it appeared to have bypassed Kolyada.

“The moment is very difficult,” Kolyada’s coach Alexei Mishin told Russian state newswire RIA Novosti. “He caught the coronavirus at the most inopportune moment.”

The Russian skating federation said that Kolyada had begun to feel unwell several days ago, that he stopped training with his group at that point, and that he had received the test result before traveling to a camp for the entire skating team that is currently under way in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk. Evgeni Semenenko, who is also coached by Mishin, will take Kolyada’s place.

All Russian figure skaters were tested on arrival in Krasnoyarsk and then every day at the training camp, Russian officials have said. The athletes are staying in separate rooms and have limited contact with the outside world.

Russian skeleton racer Nikita Tregubov, a silver medalist at the 2018 Winter Games, contracted the virus at a training camp in Sochi ahead of his upcoming flight to the Beijing Olympics, Russian state newswire TASS reported Tuesday. He said he was hoping until the last minute to be able to fly since his competition starts on February 10.

“Now I continue to be in a state of shock, I’ve been fighting as best I can for four days, but so far the tests are positive,” Tregubov told TASS.

Russia and its elite athletes have lagged other countries in vaccination throughout the pandemic. Ahead of last summer’s Tokyo Olympics, the president of the Russian Olympic Committee told Russian media that around 50% of its athlete delegation had been vaccinated. Once those Games began, most prominent Olympic delegations had athlete vaccination rates above 80%.

Though Russia has approved five homegrown Covid-19 vaccines, less than half of the population is fully vaccinated amid a deep mistrust of the state—which sponsored the development of the shots—and its medical system, experts say.

That is set to be very different in Beijing—with notable exceptions.

	<p>“The number of those vaccinated in the Olympic team is almost 100%, with the exception of minors, for whom vaccination is not a prerequisite for crossing the border,” Russian Olympic Committee President Stanislav Pozdnyakov told RIA Novosti in January.</p> <p>But minors play a very prominent role in the ROC delegation. Figure skaters Kamila Valieva, who is 15, and Anna Shcherbakova and Alexandra Trusova, who are 17, have dominated women’s singles skating for the past season, and could take gold, silver and bronze in that competition.</p> <p>Beijing 2022 organizers reiterated Wednesday that there is an exception to their vaccine-or-quarantine rule for athletes if “vaccination [is] not open to your age group in your country/region of residence.”</p> <p>The Russian Health Ministry approved a vaccine for 12-17 year olds in November and vaccination began this month.</p> <p>The International Olympic Committee didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment on the matter.</p> <p>Alexander Kogan, director general of the Russian Figure Skating Federation maintained that Shcherbakova, Trusova and Valieva weren’t covered. “In accordance with the recommendations and regulations of the Organizing Committee of the Games and according to the law of our country, underage members of the national team will not be vaccinated,” Kogan told TASS.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Omicron deaths exceed delta’s peak
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-deaths-in-u-s-exceed-deltas-peak-as-covid-19-optimism-rises-in-europe-11643201653?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>More signs emerged that the Omicron wave is taking a less serious human toll in Europe than earlier phases of the pandemic, while U.S. data showed daily average deaths from the disease exceeding the peak reached during the surge driven by the previously dominant Delta variant.</p> <p>In the U.S., the seven-day average for newly reported Covid-19 deaths reached 2,258 a day on Tuesday, up about 1,000 from daily death counts two months ago, data from Johns Hopkins University show. That is the highest since February 2021 as the country was emerging from the worst of last winter’s wave.</p> <p>While there is a large body of evidence suggesting that Omicron is less likely to kill the people it infects, it spreads much more quickly and therefore infects many more people than earlier variants, epidemiologists say. Case counts in the U.S. have dwarfed previous records.</p> <p>“Milder does not mean mild and we cannot look past the strain on our health systems and substantial number of deaths,” Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said on Wednesday. “I know many people are tired, but many of our hospitals are still struggling beyond capacity.”</p> <p>In Western Europe, where vaccination rates are generally higher than the U.S., a record surge in cases hasn’t generated the proportionate increase in hospitalizations and deaths that were seen earlier in the pandemic.</p> <p>Even as Covid-19 cases hit record highs, the Netherlands eased restrictions imposed last month in the face of Omicron—as Covid-19 hospitalizations and deaths remained subdued. Bars, restaurants, cinemas and theaters can reopen from Wednesday, with some continuing restrictions including that they close by 11 p.m.</p> <p>The Dutch government, which has been the target of protests over its lockdown decisions, said the decision wasn’t without risk. It is following others in Europe such as the U.K., Ireland and France that have lifted or eased Covid restrictions.</p>

Germany recorded a record 164,000 new cases in 24 hours on Wednesday, an increase of 46% compared with last week and bringing the seven-day daily average to more than 120,000 cases. However, coronavirus-related mortality is declining: on Wednesday, 166 deaths were reported in connection with Covid-19, a drop of 31% compared with last week and the lowest since November.

Record numbers of cases are being recorded elsewhere. Portugal is recording about 50,000 new cases a day on average, four times year-ago levels. But deaths have remained relatively low, a sign that mass vaccinations are working. Portugal is recording around 40 deaths a day, compared with the pandemic high of 290 a year ago, according to Our World In Data. Portugal has one of the world's highest vaccination rates, with over 90% of the population fully immunized.

Confirmed new Covid-19 infections in Italy, Spain and Greece are declining from the pandemic records hit earlier this month. The pressure on healthcare systems is also easing, with hospital admissions beginning to decrease in all three countries, a sign that the worst of the current wave of infections may be over.

Deaths, a lagging indicator, are still high, with 468 deaths recorded on Tuesday in Italy alone, the highest since April 2021.

In a positive sign, Covid-19 related hospitalizations in the U.S. are heading lower shortly after reaching the highest-recorded levels. Federal data also indicate Covid-19 deaths in hospitals have started to decline from a recent Omicron peak. The CDC says roughly seven of every 10 Covid-19 deaths occur in hospitals or other inpatient settings.

Some parts of the country, including major coastal states like New York and California, are also recovering. A Wall Street Journal analysis shows 20 states representing 55% of the population have case averages down at least 20% from recent peaks.

At the same time, as Omicron fades in populous, coastal areas, it hasn't yet peaked in less-vaccinated regions that could see a higher death rate, epidemiologists said, meaning deaths may climb yet further as they continue tracking the recent rise in cases.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Trucks clogging roads, delivering goods
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/trucks-roads-damage-traffic-supply-chain-11643210764?mod=hp_lead_pos4
GIST	<p>ATLANTA—Trucks are taking over American roads, fueled by a rise in pandemic online shopping and disruptions to global supply chains.</p> <p>Along the way they're chewing up pavement, adding to congestion and infuriating residents, who must contend with 18-wheelers and delivery trucks as soon as they pull out of their driveways. They're also causing headaches for state and local governments that face multibillion-dollar bills to finance road upkeep and expansions.</p> <p>The thousands more delivery trucks on neighborhood streets and tractor trailers on interstate highways are solving one problem by creating another.</p> <p>"Folks don't like them in their neighborhoods," said Seth Millican, a transportation expert at the Georgia Chamber of Commerce. "But they want the package they order from Amazon and they want it in two days."</p> <p>Those strains converge in Atlanta's Riverside neighborhood, home to Dustin Hillis, a city council member, who has spent years trying to keep tractor trailers off its residential streets.</p>

“Not a week goes by that I don’t get complaints about trucks running over street signs, stop signs, electrical poles, cutting through people’s yards,” he said.

One of Mr. Hillis’ Riverside constituents, Don Penovi, has taken it upon himself to walk the streets, sometimes wearing a yellow vest, to guide errant trucks back to the highway and to call the city to replace destroyed street signs.

“It seems like it’s been getting worse the last six, eight months or so,” he said.

Tractor trailers, or 18-wheelers, cut through the neighborhood’s narrow, tree-lined streets where there are no sidewalks, to avoid going under a low bridge. Some residents on corner lots have placed traffic cones or boulders at intersections to prevent trucks from plowing through their front yards.

In the summer of 2020, a truck came through Allison Rea’s yard and dragged away two of the three boulders she’d placed there. She hired a forklift to bring them back.

Truck mileage—tractor trailers and delivery trucks combined—on all roads hit a record of nearly 300 billion miles in the 12 months ending September 2021, roughly 2% above the same period in 2019, before the start of the pandemic, according to data from FTR Transportation Intelligence, a freight forecasting firm. Overall traffic, which mostly comprises passenger cars, remained about 3.5% below where it was in the same period of 2019.

FTR estimates truck mileage will grow 4.5% in 2022 over 2021 and 2.9% in 2023.

Analysts don’t expect the surge in trucking to die down even once [clogs in the supply chain](#) work themselves out. Depleted business inventories will need to be replenished. A recovery in home building and manufacturing will create more demand for freight. And road and bridge construction funded by the [roughly \\$1 trillion infrastructure bill that President Biden signed into law](#) last November will mean more construction trucks.

It’s also likely that online shopping will keep growing, which means vendors are going to need to beef up their freight capacity. Amazon alone recently announced it would purchase 100,000 new electric delivery trucks.

The American Trucking Associations, an industry group, says the U.S. needs an additional 80,000 truck drivers to meet demand. To address the shortage, the Biden administration in November unveiled a plan to make it easier to obtain a commercial driver’s license and to create trucking apprenticeships to draw young people into trucking careers. That could put even more trucks on the road.

“Trucking is like air,” said Rodney Morine, a third-generation truck driver from Opelousas, La. “You don’t think about the air you’re breathing until you don’t have it.”

Over the next three decades, government forecasters expect tractor-trailer traffic to grow almost three times faster, and single-unit trucks almost four times faster, than car traffic.

Engineering studies have found that the damage trucks inflict on pavements rises exponentially as the weight on each axle increases. Doubling the axle weight results in up to 16 times more damage.

State and federal transportation agencies estimate that trucks are responsible for between 35% and 40% of highway maintenance costs even though they account for less than 10% of miles driven.

A severe shortage of parking spaces for all those trucks has forced drivers to pull over on highway shoulders, mall parking lots and on residential streets to take breaks required under federal rules. Truck drivers told a Georgia state panel in 2019 they pulled over in unauthorized parking areas up to four times a week.

Few cities have been as affected by the truck boom and its backlash as Atlanta, a place with a long history as a freight hub once nicknamed “Terminus.” Two of the top five truck bottlenecks in the country are in the Atlanta area, according to the American Transportation Research Institute, a trucking think tank. Truck backups are also frequent in Fort Lee, N.J., Cincinnati and Houston, the group said.

From January to mid-October last year, there were 16% more trucks on Georgia interstates than in the same period in 2020 and 19% more than in 2019, according to data from the state department of transportation. That’s expected to grow in part because the Port of Savannah, about 250 miles away, is expanding its capacity, which will bring more goods through Atlanta-area warehouses.

Linda Jones moved to a quiet subdivision in suburban DeKalb County outside Atlanta 10 years ago. In recent years, warehouses started popping up around her and the streets filled with trucks.

Now, she said, she has to weave through tractor trailers whenever she leaves her subdivision. Trucks routinely park in her local shopping center and on the side of the entrance ramp to the interstate.

“We feel like we live in Truck City,” she said.

Donna Mullins lives in suburban Clayton County, just south of Atlanta, on land where her grandparents used to raise hogs and grow vegetables. The area has sprouted warehouses, bringing heavy trucks with them. Through the window of her home office, she keeps track of the traffic

“On a given day, I can see seven to 10,” she said. “They fly down here.”

Ms. Mullins owns a consulting business through which she runs compliance training sessions for the logistics industry. “We would die without our trucks,” she said. But they shouldn’t go through residential neighborhoods, she added. “There’s got to be some separation.”

In Henry County, just a few miles from Ms. Mullins’ house, local officials who once welcomed the warehouses and distribution centers are having second thoughts.

The board of commissioners has talked about imposing a moratorium on new warehouses or charging a fee to pay for transportation improvements.

In a November referendum, voters approved a new 1% sales tax to raise \$245 million over five years for transportation improvements. The money will widen roads and interchanges to ease truck traffic. It will also help repave roads damaged by heavy congestion, said Sam Baker, Henry County’s transportation director.

Georgia has embarked on an \$11 billion construction spree that will widen highways, rebuild interchanges and open the country’s first truck-only lanes on a stretch of Interstate 75.

A special committee in the state legislature recommended that the Georgia Department of Transportation spend up to \$1.5 billion more a year on freight infrastructure from new fuel taxes or user fees. That would amount to a roughly 40% increase in the department’s annual budget.

GDOT Planning Director Jannine Miller said the goal is to make it easier for trucks to coexist with residents. But the trucks aren’t going away, she warned.

“It’s not a thing we take lightly but it’s something where we cannot please everyone,” she said.

The federal government imposes special taxes on trucks in recognition of the damage they do to the roads. There’s a 12% sales tax on tractors and trailers, a weight tax for heavy trucks and a tax on large tires. The gas tax is also higher for diesel fuel.

Those taxes don't cover their total impact on pavements, congestion, safety or pollution, according to a study by David Austin of the Congressional Budget Office, the nonpartisan scorekeeper of Congress.

Raising taxes on trucks so they cover the full cost would lead to more goods moving by rail, which would reduce the number of highway truck trips by up to 3.3 million, the study said.

The American Trucking Associations says trucks already pay 45% of all highway user fees even though they account for less than 10% of all miles driven. The group supported raising fuel taxes across the board to pay for the recently enacted infrastructure bill, said Robert Costello, the ATA's top economist.

Congress instead relied mostly on borrowing and on repurposed Covid-19 relief money to pay for the bill, which included more than \$8 billion in grants for freight infrastructure and safety programs.

The pandemic has accelerated a move toward e-commerce that had been under way for the past several years. Online retail made up 16% of retail sales in November, the last month for which data is available, up from 14% in the same month of 2019, before the pandemic.

All those purchases emptied out retail inventories, prompting a surge of new orders to manufacturers, which themselves had to order new parts and machinery to meet that demand. Getting those goods to homes and factories requires a constellation of warehouses and trucks moving between them. The nation's warehouse space rose 2.8% in 2020, the biggest jump since 2001, according to CBRE, a real-estate company. Warehouse capacity grew another 2.5% in 2021.

Backlogged supply chains have driven up the number of trucks on the road. Faced with a shortage of parts and equipment, businesses are willing to pay more to get products where they need to go. Instead of shipping goods by train—a less expensive but slower option—companies are now booking trucks on the spot. Some of those trucks are being moved without a full load, said Eric Starks, chief executive at FTR Transportation Intelligence.

Truck utilization rates, which measure the share of trucks that are on the road, hit 100% in both the second and the third quarter of 2021, according to FTR data. That means every available truck and every available driver were running.

High utilization rates have led to shortages of containers and chassis—the support on which truck containers rest—which means some trucks are being sent over the road to move a chassis, rather than freight, Mr. Starks said.

“Everybody’s going crazy,” he said. “When that happens, that’s when more inefficiency in the system happens. You’re getting paid a lot of money and you don’t care if you’re efficient or not.”

There are many reasons for the [shortage of truckers](#). The frustrations of the job are one, and that includes tensions that arise from the increased conflict with the public.

Truck drivers say they have to put up with reckless drivers and an unappreciative public which nevertheless expects packages delivered right away.

At the start of the pandemic “truck drivers were looked at as heroes,” said Hamlin Raney, who drives a flatbed truck across the Southeast. The sentiment has evaporated, he said. “People cutting you off: It’s a daily thing.”

Roughly 70% of American freight moves by truck, said Todd Spencer, president of the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association, which represents smaller trucking companies.

“So a reasonable person would assume we’ve got to have trucks,” he said. “There has to be an accommodation made and people are not in a very accommodating mood.”

HEADLINE	01/26 Health officials: 3 flu-related deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/washington/article257759383.html
GIST	<p>Three people have died in Washington after testing positive for the flu amid flu activity that has risen to moderate levels in the state, state health officials said Wednesday.</p> <p>The Department of Health said in a news release that the three people who died were age 65 or older and tested positive for influenza A.</p> <p>The last time Washington reported a flu-related death was during the 2019-2020 flu season when there were 114 influenza-associated deaths, officials said.</p> <p>Last season, officials said flu activity was historically low, likely because of COVID-19 measures taken to slow the spread of illness.</p> <p>State Chief Science Officer Dr. Tao Sheng Kwan-Gett in the news release urged flu vaccinations for people ages 6 months and older.</p> <p>“Hospitalizations across the state remain high due to omicron, and other respiratory viruses like influenza could overload them even more,” Dr. Tao Sheng Kwan-Gett said. “Vaccination will help keep you and your family healthy and out of the hospital.”</p> <p>Additionally, health officials said everyone should wash their hands often with soap and water, cover their coughs and sneezes, and stay home when sick. Masks help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and the flu, officials said.</p> <p>Flu activity typically peaks between December and February, but significant activity can last as late as May.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 DOH: 1,257,918 cases, 10,580 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article257750143.html
GIST	<p>Following the break of a data logjam, the Washington state Department of Health reported more than 41,000 new COVID-19 cases Wednesday.</p> <p>It did not represent a spike in the disease, the agency said. “It is likely due to several factors, including the ability to process more cases using a brand-new processor that is now up and running; and finally catching up with the backlog of positive lab results caused by system slowdowns over the last several weeks due to Omicron,” DOH said.</p> <p>As of Jan. 25, the state’s preliminary death tally was 10,580. The confirmed death tally as of Jan. 9 was 10,269.</p> <p>The statewide case total from the illness caused by the coronavirus stood at 1,257,918 cases on Wednesday.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 King Co. issues ‘urgent plea’ to public
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/coronavirus/article/King-County-issues-urgent-plea-to-public-16804360.php
GIST	<p>Health officials in King County issued an “urgent plea” to the public this week in which they asked area residents to do what they can to help reduce the pressure on county hospitals, which have seen a 700% increase in admissions over the past month.</p> <p>Officials say the surge in hospitalizations — driven by the extraordinarily contagious omicron variant of</p>

the coronavirus — has led to canceled surgeries and long delays in care for patients who don't have COVID-19.

In a [post on the county's public health blog](#), Dr. Paul Ramsey, CEO of UW Medicine, said health care workers are counting on the public to help stymie the surge.

"The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most serious threats to the health of the public in our lifetime," he said. "While our health care workers continue to provide life-saving patient care under the most difficult circumstance, our call to action is urgent."

The blog post said an average of 70 people are being hospitalized each day, up from just eight people at this time last month. [County data](#) show that an average of 3,126 new cases are being reported per day.

Statewide, Washington is seeing nearly 23,000 new cases and 2,500 hospitalizations per day. Roughly 63% of state residents are fully vaccinated.

The spike in hospitalizations over the past month led state Gov. Jay Inslee to [recently order a four-week pause](#) on all non-urgent medical procedures, as well as dispatch members of the Washington National Guard to assist staff at several state hospitals.

King County's call-to-action to the public was printed as an ad in Sunday's edition of the Seattle Times. It was signed by MultiCare Health System, Overlake Medical Center & Clinics, the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, Seattle Children's, Snoqualmie Valley Hospital, Swedish, UW Medicine, Virginia Mason Franciscan Health, Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Washington State Hospital Association.

The ad said county residents can help curb the surge in hospitalizations by getting vaccinated; avoiding crowded indoor areas; getting a booster dose; upgrading their mask to an N95, KN95 or KF94; staying out of hospitals unless they're experiencing a medical emergency; and receiving regular check-ups from their primary care doctor.

Despite the county's grim virus figures, health officials are confident the omicron surge will slow down in the coming weeks. On Sunday, Dr. Anthony Fauci — the nation's top infectious disease expert — [told ABC News](#) that he was "as confident as you can be" that most states will have reached a peak of omicron cases by mid-February.

"Things are looking good," he said. "We don't want to get overconfident, but they look like they're going in the right direction right now."

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HEADLINE	01/26 Omicron fears subside, parts EU reopen
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/26/as-omicron-fears-subside-europe-starts-to-reopen
GIST	<p>The Netherlands has lifted its toughest Covid controls, Denmark is to remove all restrictions within days and France will begin easing curbs next week, as many – but not all – EU countries opt to reopen despite record infection numbers.</p> <p>The moves come as data shows hospital and intensive care admissions are not surging in line with cases, and after the World Health Organization suggested the Omicron variant – which studies show is more contagious but usually less severe for vaccinated people – may signal a new, more manageable phase in the pandemic.</p> <p>Dutch bars, restaurants and museums were allowed to reopen on Wednesday after the prime minister, Mark Rutte, said the government was “consciously looking for the limits of what is possible” as case numbers continued to hit new daily highs.</p>

Intensive care admissions and deaths, however, have been falling in the **Netherlands**, and the health minister, Ernst Kuipers, said a decision to prolong restrictive measures would have risked “harming our health and our society”.

Cafes, bars and restaurants closed since mid-December can now reopen with reduced capacity and until 10pm as long as customers have a Covid pass, with cinemas, theatres, museums and sports events also allowed to welcome the public back.

The **Danish** government, which two weeks ago allowed cinemas and music venues to reopen after a month’s closure, also announced on Wednesday plans to scrap remaining domestic coronavirus controls from 1 February. The move – which must be approved by parliament – will allow nightclubs to reopen, restaurants to serve alcohol after 10pm, and shops to lift limits on customer numbers. Vaccine passes will no longer be needed, and commuters may travel without wearing masks.

Like the Netherlands, Denmark has set successive recent daily infection records. But while coronavirus-related hospitalisations have risen, health authorities say 30%-40% of patients with a positive test are in hospital for reasons other than Covid.

“There has been a decoupling in the trend earlier in the epidemic, between increasing infection and increase in Covid hospitalisations,” the government’s expert advisory panel said. The number of Covid patients in intensive care has nearly halved since early January.

Belgium last week announced a slight easing of its restrictions from Friday despite record infections, with bars and restaurants allowed to stay open until midnight and indoor activities such as play areas and bowling alleys to reopen.

The country’s current Omicron wave is not expected to peak for a fortnight, but hospital admissions are rising at a far slower rate than infections and the number of patients in intensive care is falling. “The situation is manageable,” said the virologist Steven Van Gucht.

France on Tuesday reported a new daily record of 501,635 new cases but, again, while hospital admissions have risen, only about half as many patients are in intensive care as during previous waves, and the number has been falling since 12 January.

The health minister, Olivier Véran, said the peak of the current coronavirus wave should be reached within the next few days, while the prime minister, Jean Castex, last week announced a timetable for lifting Covid restrictions from 2 February.

Castex said France’s vaccine pass, required since Monday to enter restaurants, cinemas and other public venues, would allow audience capacity limits for concert halls and sports and other events to be lifted, with working from home also no longer mandatory for many employees and face masks not needed outside.

Some countries, however, are not yet ready to relax restrictions. **Sweden**’s health minister, Lena Hallengren, on Wednesday extended pandemic curbs by another two weeks because of “an extremely high level of spread”, meaning bars and restaurants must continue to close at 11pm.

In **Germany**, which on Wednesday reported a new 24-hour record of 164,000 infections, MPs are preparing to debate proposals to either require or strongly encourage vaccination. About 74% of the population has received at least one dose, less than in France, Italy or Spain, but the government is divided over a possible vaccine mandate. Options include requiring all adult residents to be vaccinated against Covid, only those above 50, or merely to mandate counselling for unvaccinated people.

The WHO’s Europe director, Hans Kluge, said on Sunday it was “plausible” the region was “moving towards a kind of pandemic endgame” and that Omicron could have infected 60% of the continent’s inhabitants by March.

	<p>Once the current surge is over, immunity through infection or vaccination should last “quite some weeks and months”, Kluge told Agence-France Presse, adding that Covid may come back at the end of the year but not necessarily as a pandemic.</p> <p>He cautioned, however, that it was still too early to consider Covid endemic. “There is a lot of talk about endemic but endemic means it is possible to predict what’s going to happen. This virus has surprised us more than once,” he said, adding that other variants could still emerge.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Focused Russia attack Ukraine more likely?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/26/focused-russian-attack-on-ukraine-seen-as-more-likely-than-full-scale-invasion
GIST	<p>Russia does not currently have enough troops on the border with Ukraine to carry out a full-scale military invasion and occupation of the country, according to western experts and senior officials in Kyiv.</p> <p>They believe a Russian attack to capture most or all of Ukraine in the near future is unlikely, despite an unprecedented buildup of about 125,000 Russian soldiers, and military exercises due to take place next month in Belarus, within striking distance of the capital.</p> <p>In an article published on Monday, Ukraine’s former defence minister Andriy Zagorodnyuk said the Kremlin has not yet amassed the several hundred thousand troops necessary for a large-scale operation, on the border and in Russian territory behind the frontline.</p> <p>Several elements for an invasion were missing, he argued. These include completing the formation of battalion tactical groups including tank and airborne, setting up and testing a system of wartime administration, and deploying and staffing mobile hospitals.</p> <p>“If Russia was conducting preparations for a large-scale invasion, it would have been much more noticeable,” Zagorodnyuk said, in a paper written with colleagues from his Kyiv thinktank, the Centre for Defence Strategies.</p> <p>The analysis is supported by others. Konrad Muzyka, an open source intelligence specialist and president of Rochan Consulting, estimates that 66-67 Russian battalion tactical groups, the smallest operational unit in Moscow’s army, are in place near the border, including 11 battalion that have moved to Belarus.</p> <p>Nevertheless, the US has suggested a full invasion would require at least 100 battalion, and western analysts familiar with the difficulties in holding Iraq have suggested twice that number or more would be needed to fight any counterinsurgency.</p> <p>That larger force could be ready “if they maintain the current pace, in two to three weeks”, Muzyka said, particularly if airborne troops were brought up closer to the border. But Muzyka is sceptical that the battalions are full strength, with an average of 800 personnel. “Satellite imagery shows that there are too few tents,” he added.</p> <p>If the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, wanted to target Kyiv with a lightning attack, the most direct route would be from Belarus, although any attack on the capital with more than 3 million people would risk large numbers of civilian casualties.</p> <p>It would also be larger in scale than anything that Putin, or indeed Russia, has attempted since the second world war. Nick Reynolds, a land warfare analyst with the Rusi thinktank, believes it would stretch Russian logistics to their limit. “I question their ability to coordinate on this scale,” he said.</p> <p>Supply is a particular issue, Reynolds added. “Russian units tend to hold a large stock of supplies and ammunition, using them until they run out. It makes them dangerous at first, but as they push deeper into</p>

hostile territory, their effectiveness drops quickly,” he said. Fresh units have to come forward and take over, because there is no immediate supply capability.

On the other hand, moving forces to Belarus, under the cover of the Allied Resolve joint exercises, also lengthens the territory Ukrainian forces have to defend and create openings for Russian tanks elsewhere. “They don’t have the manpower to cover it all,” Muzyka said.

“It isn’t difficult to get to Kyiv. The problem is to hold territory. To control it Russia will need a lot of troops,” said Gen Sergey Krivonos, the former deputy secretary in Ukraine’s national security and defence council.

He added: “Russian soldiers have been fed a lot of propaganda that doesn’t correspond to reality. They would quickly discover the population is deeply hostile. It’s an information failure.”

In the face of such obstacles, military and western sources believe the Kremlin is more likely to launch a more focused attack in the east and the Donbas region, where a war between the Ukrainian army and Moscow-armed separatists has gone on for nearly eight years, with 14,000 people killed.

This could be coupled with “hybrid” measures designed to demoralise the Ukrainian population such as cyber-shutdowns and attacks on critical infrastructure. The US has warned Russia is preparing a “false flag” operation inside separatist territory, which might be used as a pretext for war.

A British defence minister, James Heappey, said on Tuesday that the UK had intelligence to suggest efforts were being made to prepare the ground for a possible Russian attack. “We are becoming aware of a significant number of individuals that are assessed to be associated with Russian military advance-force operations and currently located in Ukraine,” he said.

The two sides face one another across a 155-mile (250km) “line of contact” around the rebel-held cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. Last week Ukrainian military intelligence agency said since the beginning of January Moscow [has supplied the separatists](#) with additional tanks, self-propelled artillery, mortars and more than 7,000 tons of fuel. Their numbers are roughly estimated at 34,000, but reliable figures are hard to come by.

The Kremlin has been actively recruiting mercenaries at centres inside the Russian Federation, the agency added. These unofficial soldiers go through “intensive training courses” before being smuggled across the Russian border to occupied Donetsk and Luhansk, it said.

Russia’s armed forces have been present covertly in separatist areas since 2014, according to the Ukrainian government. They could openly enter the conflict and then attempt to break through Ukrainian lines, amid a general intensification of hostilities.

Speaking privately, Ukrainian government insiders concede Moscow could easily target the port of Mariupol, which is 15 miles away from the frontline. The city is economically prosperous and home to a large metallurgical factory, the Illich iron and steelworks, named after Lenin.

Expanding territory controlled by the separatist Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) would make the Russian-backed enclave more viable. Putin already effectively controls these areas and may take steps to recognise them legally or even annex them.

“It would be extremely hard for Russian troops to seize major Ukrainian cities such as Kyiv, Kharkiv or Odessa. There would be enormous resistance,” one former senior Ukrainian government official said. The person added: “A takeover of Mariupol would be easier. You could do it in two days and provoke a political crisis in Kyiv.”

A potential window for any offensive in the Donbas would be after 4 February, when Putin is due to attend the opening of the winter olympics in Beijing and to meet the Chinese president, Xi Jinping. The military exercises in Belarus are due to finish on 20 February, the most obvious moment for an offensive operation.

Any push to seize Mariupol could be carried out under a DNR flag, allowing the Kremlin deniability. It could claim fighting was part of a “civil war” in which it was not involved. However, it also has the option of encircling the port, by landing tanks and soldiers from the Sea of Azov.

Analysts agree that the situation is unpredictable, with many scenarios possible. But the consensus is Ukraine’s army consisting of 145,000 troops, according to the IISS thinktank, and 300,000 to 400,000 veterans with combat experience would offer significant resistance, even if outgunned by Russian forces with a superior air force and navy.

Along the existing frontline, Ukraine has deployed surface-to-air missile systems, officials are keen to stress, and a range of anti-tank weapons, including portable US Javelins, with a range of 1.6 miles, Ukrainian-made Stugna, and thousands of NLAW (next generation light anti-tank weapons), delivered to Kyiv last week by Boris Johnson’s government.

In the past week, Latvia and Lithuania, with the endorsement of the US, also dispatched Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Germany, however, has so far declined to supply Ukraine with arms, holding up potential re-export of German-made artillery from the Baltic States.

Russia can deploy several thousand battle tanks and fighting vehicles, if its often cautious commanders are willing to tolerate losses in battle.

Yuriy Dumansky, the former deputy chief of Ukraine’s army staff, said soldiers were better prepared than in 2014, when they suffered humiliating military defeats, including in the eastern city of Ilovaisk. “They have learned how to fight. Psychologically they are much stronger,” he said.

Dumansky said the Kremlin’s recently deployment of troops to Kazakhstan showed its ability to react to political events quickly and decisively. But he said he was sceptical Russia had “sufficient” soldiers for a large-scale Ukraine invasion and said a “low intensity” conflict was more probable. “It was Machiavelli who pointed out it was easy to seize territory but much harder to hold it,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/26 King Co. schools seek \$billions in funding
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education/lab/king-county-voters-will-weigh-in-on-a-slew-of-school-levy-and-bond-measures/
GIST	<p>So much about schooling has changed during the pandemic, but one thing remains the same: Districts say they need far more money than they get from the state — even with the extra funds mandated by the landmark 2012 McCleary decision requiring Olympia to amply fund basic education.</p> <p>Witness the dozens of levies and bond measures before King County voters on the Feb. 8 ballot.</p> <p>For example, the state pays for special education costs associated with up to 13.5% of a district’s enrollment. Yet, Seattle Public Schools and the Northshore School District say about 15% of their students qualify for special education, and the small amount of money chipped in by the federal government doesn’t make up the difference.</p> <p>Money for special education amounts to roughly a third of Northshore’s \$265 million ask in its educational programs and operations levy measure, said school board member Sandy Hayes.</p> <p>Another case in point: The state funds nine nurses for the 106 schools in the Seattle district, according to Assistant Superintendent for Business and Finance JoLynn Berge; the district employs 68.</p>

The state also provides limited funds for technology — “only 14% of what is needed to support a large school district,” said Barbara Posthumus, associate superintendent of business and support services for the Lake Washington School District. It is trying to pass [three levy measures](#), including one that would raise [\\$177 million](#), largely for technology.

Technology needs exponentially increased when schools shifted to remote learning. Federal pandemic relief money helped, but Posthumus said it wasn’t enough. The Lake Washington district bought laptops and hot spots for staff and many of its 31,000 students.

Likewise, Berge, of the Seattle district, said, “We’ve probably added 40,000 devices with the onset of the pandemic.” The district has upped the amount it plans to spend on technology by more than \$100 million since the last levy. Technology represents about a third of the district’s six-year, [\\$783 million capital levy request](#).

That’s a big number, reflective of the lucky position the Seattle district occupies when it comes to levies, which collect money through property taxes over a period of up to six years. Not only have Seattle voters rarely rejected a school funding request in recent history, but the district’s levies can raise an astounding amount.

Its [two levies passed in 2019](#) amounted to \$2.2 *billion* and the [two currently on the ballot](#) add up to \$1.4 billion. That’s enough to tackle capital projects like school construction, projects that are [not considered “basic” education](#) and therefore funded by the state according to the McCleary ruling.

[A lawsuit](#), filed by rural Wahkiakum School District, argues it’s unfair for taxpayers to shoulder the burden of raising money for school buildings. But that’s the current system. And most state districts need to pass bond measures — allowing them to borrow money and pay it back with interest over 20 or more years — to raise even a fraction of the amount Seattle and a few other wealthy districts can raise with levies.

Consider Northshore, which has a capital bond measure on the ballot that would raise \$425 million, to be used for adding classroom space and alleviating overcrowding that has the district relying on 172 portables.

“We’re going to struggle a bit more because we don’t have industry in the way some of the other districts in King County do,” said Hayes, the school board member. The largely suburban district doesn’t have big businesses like Microsoft or Amazon, which raise the amount of property values taxes can be collected on.

Hayes said bond measures have advantages. If passed, a district can borrow the total amount of money right away, start a variety of projects and take advantage of current prices before they go up. Levies, in contrast, provide only a partial amount every year.

But bond measures are harder to pass, requiring a supermajority, or 60%, of the vote instead of the simple majority that levies require. Northshore is the only district in King County currently putting a bond measure forward.

Jeff Heckathorn, a sharp critic of bond measures who runs a website [analyzing school funding data](#), maintains interest and fees end up costing taxpayers far more than advertised. He has made the point to the King County Assessor’s Office, which has an [online tool](#) for property owners to estimate the amount of taxes they will pay (<https://localscape.spatalest.com/#kingcountyassessor/Tax>).

Chief Deputy Assessor Al Dams and Lisa Youngblood Hall, spokesperson for the Northshore district, said bond proposals are like houses for sale: the price listed doesn’t include interest paid on a loan, or mortgage. “We don’t know the interest rate until we sell the bonds,” Youngblood Hall added.

But she said a [projected tax rate](#) includes estimated interest. Dams said the county Assessor's Office only got the principal amount from Northshore, and has decided to make that clear with a note in its tool, as with any other bond measures in which that might arise.

Such considerations don't seem to weigh heavily on Northshore district voters, which have consistently supported bond measures. "I feel like I need to be throwing salt over my shoulder or something," Hayes said.

That's not so of voters in the Lake Washington district. Between 2010 and now, the district has run [five bond measures](#). Some got as much as 55% of the vote, but only one got the necessary supermajority, [in 2016](#), according to Posthumus.

Levies, however, have tended to pass easily. So the district this year opted to propose a \$295 million levy to address the most critical construction projects.

Like Northshore, the Lake Washington district — which has grown by 31% since 2008 — also wants to build classrooms and reduce its use of portables. The district has 162 of these makeshift classroom buildings. A dozen are in one school alone, Louisa May Alcott Elementary.

Meanwhile, some legislators are continuing a long-running effort to require only a simple majority for passing school bonds, a change that would take a constitutional amendment, approved by two-thirds of each branch of the Legislature and then a vote of the people. A bill introduced this month, [HJR 4200](#), attempts to get the ball rolling.

"Why doesn't the majority rule?" asked Joel Aune, executive director of the Washington Association of School Administrators and one of many education advocates supporting the bill. He recalled a [2011 election](#) when he was superintendent of the Snoqualmie Valley School District.

The district was so overcrowded that some teachers didn't have classrooms, and wheeled carts into spaces momentarily vacated by colleagues with planning periods. Snoqualmie Valley asked voters to approve a bond measure to build a middle school.

It failed by [one vote](#), Aune recalled. Not 1%. One vote. "It was really a tough night," he said. And a frustrating one, given that 59.99% of the vote would be "a landslide in any other election."

But Liv Finne, director of the [Center for Education](#) at the Washington Policy Center, a conservative think tank, said in a draft legislative memo that "the 60 percent voter approval requirement is a safeguard built into the state constitution to prevent families, business owners, the elderly and other property owners from being overburdened by long-term public debt." She also said the requirement does not stop many bond measures from passing.

The Feb. 8 election will again put that to the test.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Supreme Court Justice Breyer to retire
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/us/liberal-us-supreme-court-justice-stephen-breyer-retire-media-reports-2022-01-26/
GIST	<p>Jan 26 (Reuters) - Liberal Justice Stephen Breyer, at 83 the oldest member of the U.S. Supreme Court, will retire at the end of the court's current term that runs through the end of June, NBC News and CNN reported on Wednesday, giving President Joe Biden the opportunity to appoint a successor who could serve for decades.</p> <p>Breyer authored important rulings upholding abortion rights and healthcare access, helped advance LGBT rights and questioned the constitutionality of the death penalty but often found himself in dissent on a court that has moved rightward and currently has a 6-3 conservative majority.</p>

He was appointed to the Supreme Court by Democratic President Bill Clinton in 1994. Only conservative Justice Clarence Thomas, one of two Black men ever on the high court, has served longer among the current justices, joining it in 1991.

Biden during the 2020 presidential election campaign pledged to nominate a Black woman to fill any Supreme Court vacancy, which would be a historic first. Biden's fellow Democrats hold a razor-thin majority in the U.S. Senate, which under the U.S. Constitution gets to confirm Supreme Court nominees.

Potential Biden nominees include Ketanji Brown Jackson, a former Breyer law clerk who was confirmed by the Senate last June to serve on an influential U.S. appellate court, and Leondra Kruger, who serves on the California Supreme Court.

Thurgood Marshall is the only other Black justice in U.S. history, having served from 1967 to 1991.

A Biden appointee would not change the court's ideological balance, but would enable him to refresh its liberal wing with a much younger jurist in the lifetime post.

Biden's Republican predecessor Donald Trump appointed three justices during his four years in office, all of whom were young enough to serve for decades. The Senate, then under Republican control, confirmed Trump's appointment of conservative Justice Amy Coney Barrett in 2020 after the death of liberal Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

After Biden defeated Trump in the 2020 election, some liberal activists urged Breyer to step aside while Democrats control the Senate, concerned that if he does not do so, Republicans could block confirmation of his successor in the chamber or a future Republican president could be able to name his replacement and tilt the court even further to the right.

The Senate is split 50-50, with Democrats in control because Vice President Kamala Harris can cast a tie-breaking vote. Confirmation of a justice requires a simple majority vote rather than a previous 60-vote threshold under a change made by Senate Republicans in 2017 when they controlled the chamber and faced Democratic opposition to Trump's first Supreme Court nominee.

Liberal activists are eager to avoid a repeat of what happened when Trump was able to replace Ginsburg, expanding the court's conservative majority.

The court's current nine-month term began in October. It has been marked by an increasing assertiveness of its conservative majority. The court already is due to issue rulings by the end of June in cases giving the conservative justices a chance to curtail abortion rights and widen gun rights. The justices this week took up a case to be decided in their next term that could doom university policies considering race as a factor in student admissions and cripple affirmative action policies long despised by the American right.

On the court's liberal wing, Breyer was considered a moderate with who sought consensus when possible.

Breyer last year authored a ruling rejecting a Republican bid to invalidate Obamacare, preserving the landmark healthcare law formally called the Affordable Care Act for the third time since its 2010 enactment. He also wrote a ruling last year in a major free speech case that sided with a cheerleader who had been punished by her high school for a profanity-laced social media post.

Breyer authored two important abortion rulings in 2016 and 2020 that struck down restrictions on clinics in Texas and Louisiana. He also was in the majority in the landmark ruling in 2015 that legalized gay marriage.

Breyer in recent years emerged as a persistent critic of the death penalty and wrote that it was "highly likely" that capital punishment violates the Constitution's Eighth Amendment prohibition on cruel and

	<p>unusual punishment. He noted that innocent people have been executed, that capital punishment has been marred by racial discrimination and politics and that death sentences have been imposed arbitrarily.</p> <p>He previously served for 14 years as an appeals court judge on the Boston-based 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals after having been appointed to that post by Democratic President Jimmy Carter in 1980. Breyer also had stints as a professor at Harvard Law School and as a staffer on Capitol Hill and in the Justice Department.</p> <p>The court's other two liberal justices are Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 UK: volunteers wanted to catch Covid
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/wanted-volunteers-catch-covid-name-science-2022-01-26/
GIST	<p>Jan 26 (Reuters) - The world's first medical trial authorised to deliberately expose participants to the coronavirus is seeking more volunteers as it steps up efforts to help develop better vaccines.</p> <p>The Oxford University trial was launched last April, three months after Britain became the first country to approve what are known as challenge trials for humans involving COVID-19. read more</p> <p>Its first phase, still ongoing, has focused on finding out how much of the virus is needed to trigger an infection while the second will aim to determine the immune response needed to ward one off, the university said in a statement on Tuesday.</p> <p>Researchers are close to establishing the weakest possible virus infection that assures about half of people exposed to it get asymptomatic or mild COVID-19.</p> <p>They then plan to expose volunteers - all previously naturally infected or vaccinated - to that dose of the virus's original variant to determine what levels of antibodies or immune T-cells are required to prevent an infection.</p> <p>"This is the immune response we then need to induce with a new vaccine," said Helen McShane, Oxford University Professor of Vaccinology and the study's chief investigator.</p> <p>The trial's findings will help make future vaccine development much quicker and more efficient, the statement said.</p> <p>Global immunologists have been seeking to pinpoint the immune reaction that a vaccine must produce to shield against the illness, known as a correlate of protection. Once discovered, the need for mass vaccine trials is greatly reduced. read more</p> <p>Scientists have used human challenge trials for decades to develop treatments against many infectious diseases, but this is the first known such research into COVID-19.</p> <p>A drawback is the risk of harm to volunteers contracting the disease but the university is taking precautions.</p> <p>Participants will need to be healthy and aged 18-30. They will be quarantined for at least 17 days and any who develop symptoms will be given Regeneron's monoclonal antibody treatment Ronapreve.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 US delivers written response to Russia
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-destructive-sanctions-wouldnt-hurt-putin-personally-2022-01-26/

GIST	<p>MOSCOW/PARIS, Jan 26 (Reuters) - The United States delivered written replies on Wednesday to sweeping Russian security demands, a key step in a fragile diplomatic process as Russia staged new military drills on land and sea near Ukraine.</p> <p>Russia's Foreign Ministry said the U.S. response was delivered in person by U.S. ambassador to Moscow John Sullivan.</p> <p>Washington has made clear that Russian demands for NATO to pull back troops and weapons from eastern Europe and bar Ukraine from ever joining are non-starters. It says it is ready to discuss other topics such as arms control and confidence-building measures.</p> <p>Whether Russia is prepared to accept that limited agenda will determine the next phase of the crisis, which has seen Moscow mass around 100,000 troops near the border with Ukraine while denying it plans to invade.</p> <p>In Paris, four-nation talks dragged on longer than expected on ending a separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine, part of a wider crisis between Moscow and Kyiv that has raised the risk of a full-scale war.</p> <p>Moscow warned earlier on Wednesday that imposing sanctions on President Vladimir Putin personally would not hurt him but would be "politically destructive", after U.S. President Joe Biden said he would consider such a move if Russia invaded Ukraine.</p> <p>Biden said on Tuesday that personal sanctions on Putin, though a rare step, could be considered as part of a concerted drive by Washington and its allies to convince Moscow that any new aggression against Ukraine would bring swift and massive costs.</p> <p>Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said U.S. lawmakers discussing personal sanctions against Russia's top leaders were ignorant of the fact they were legally barred from holding assets, property and bank accounts abroad.</p> <p>Individual sanctions against Putin would be "not painful (but) politically destructive", said Peskov, who has previously said they would amount to a severing of diplomatic relations.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 W. Africa coups show limits of diplomacy
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/w-africa-coups-show-limits-diplomacy-opening-door-new-players-2022-01-26/
GIST	<p>DAKAR, Jan 26 (Reuters) - Earlier this month, West African countries slapped tough economic sanctions on Mali to punish coup leaders seeking to extend their hold on power, and to halt a run of military takeovers that have beset the region since 2020.</p> <p>Burkina Faso's military did not get the message. On Monday, two weeks after the 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) announced the sanctions, the Burkinabe army arrested President Roch Kabore and seized power.</p> <p>As the international community condemned West Africa's fourth coup in 18 months, crowds in the capital Ouagadougou cheered the Burkinabe army - a contrast to anti-coup protests that erupted when the military briefly seized power in 2015.</p> <p>The reaction echoed scenes in Mali and Guinea, whose coup leaders received warm welcomes at home.</p> <p>West African nations and international allies have struggled to mount an effective response, as populations lose faith in governments many see as manipulating the democratic process and unable to alleviate poverty or repel Islamist militant violence.</p>

The problems pre-date recent coups. Unlike its vocal opposition to military takeovers, ECOWAS remained silent as sitting presidents maintained their grip on power by extending terms under what critics call "constitutional coups".

"Today, ECOWAS is not a credible institution to people," said Abdoulaye Barry, a Burkinabe researcher at the United Nations' University for Peace.

"As long as they are not going to offer adequate responses to the governance deficit, coups are going to multiply."

An ECOWAS spokesperson was not available to comment on its track record.

Other countries, including France and European allies, have maintained a military presence in the region, and partner local armed forces to fight groups like al Qaeda and Islamic State, meaning military support continues despite criticism of coups.

France in particular has deployed thousands of troops to West Africa's Sahel region over the past decade, but security has progressively deteriorated, fuelling anti-French sentiment.

OPENING FOR RUSSIA?

The sanctions and international condemnations have arguably bolstered coup leaders' standing at home.

Mali's military-led transitional government, which took power in an August 2020 coup, went back on a commitment to hold elections next month. Instead, it proposed to rule for another four years.

ECOWAS' sanctions included locking Mali out of regional financial markets and closing its borders, potentially devastating blows for the impoverished landlocked country.

Although the pain caused by rising food prices and shortages could yet turn people against the authorities, forcing the junta to the negotiating table, for now sanctions appear to be having the opposite effect.

Protests against the sanctions, which even some critics of the junta criticise as draconian, drew tens of thousands into the streets. People held signs that read: "Down with ECOWAS" and "Down with France".

Coup leaders have found new allies. As tensions with France rose, Mali's interim government struck a deal with Russia to send in military trainers.

France and its Western allies say many of these trainers are mercenaries from a private military contractor under European Union sanctions. Malian authorities deny this.

"Coalitions outside the traditional U.N. structures are emerging and staking a claim to security and economic partnerships in Africa," a West African diplomat said, citing Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States.

On Tuesday, Alexander Ivanov, the official representative of Russian military trainers in Central African Republic, issued a statement on the situation in Burkina Faso.

"I believe that if Russian instructors are invited to train the Burkina Faso army, they will be able to do so effectively," Ivanov said.

The new Burkinabe authorities have not commented on any potential Russian deployment. At the pro-coup rally on Tuesday, some in the crowd held Russian flags.

Alliances closer to home may also undermine attempts to punish military takeovers.

When ECOWAS ordered member states to close borders with Mali, Guinea said it would not comply, allowing continued access to the port of Conakry. The junta in Burkina Faso, which also borders Mali, has not yet said if it will do the same.

ROOT CAUSES

ECOWAS, founded in 1975 to promote economic integration in post-colonial West Africa, can still inflict pain through sanctions.

Nearly 30% of Mali's trade is with ECOWAS member states, according to U.N. data, and food prices are starting to rise in the capital Bamako, residents say.

But diplomats and analysts said the influence of ECOWAS and foreign powers traditionally active in the region has been hampered by eroding credibility.

Some traced that back to 2015, when the bloc came close to banning presidential third terms after Burkina Faso's veteran leader Blaise Compaore was ousted the previous year in an uprising sparked by his efforts to extend his time in office.

Such a move would have been a first for an African regional body, but it never happened.

ECOWAS was silent in 2020 as the presidents of Guinea and Ivory Coast won third terms after altering constitutions that barred them from running again.

"ECOWAS needs to address the root causes of the recent coups ... including the situations where governments manipulate the constitutions to remain in power," said Said Djinnit, the former commissioner for peace and security at the African Union and top U.N. diplomat in West Africa.

Anger over Guinean President Alpha Conde's third term was one of the reasons the military cited when it overthrew him last September.

Guinea's ruling junta has promised to oversee a transition back to democracy but has declined to set a date for elections. ECOWAS has imposed targeted sanctions against junta members and their families.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Northeast faces major winter storm
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bomb-cyclone-northeast-noreaster-snow-hurricane-winds/
GIST	<p>A major winter storm with the potential for hurricane-force winds and heavy snow is threatening to slam the Northeast this weekend. The quickly-intensifying winter storm could develop into a nor'easter, and possibly a bomb cyclone, as it travels along the coast in the coming days, according to AccuWeather.</p> <p>"Confidence is increasing that a significant winter storm will create considerable impacts Friday through the weekend from the Mid-Atlantic through the Northeast," the National Weather Service said Wednesday.</p> <p>The heaviest snow is anticipated to hit New England, although snowfall is also possible in metro areas further south, including New York City and Washington, D.C., the weather agency said. Coastal northeastern cities could also be in for strong hurricane-force wind gusts between 40 to 60 miles per hour in the coming days, according to Accuweather.</p> <p>In eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island, up to 16 inches of snow could accumulate from a bomb cyclone — which occurs when a cyclone rapidly intensifies and strengthens due to the central pressure decreasing by at least 24 millibars in 24 hours. In Vermont and northern New York, wind chills could reach -20 degrees Fahrenheit. Southeast Connecticut could see six or more inches of snowfall.</p>

	<p>But with the storm still two days away, its track and total snow amounts in certain areas are still uncertain, which the National Weather Service says is unusual.</p> <p>"This is a low confidence forecast at this time," the agency said Wednesday. "Significant changes are possible."</p> <p>The NWS urged those in the storm's potential path to monitor the winter storm's forecast updates, to be ready for potential scattered power outages, to purchase snow shovels and to fill up car gas tanks ahead of time.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Govt. eyes universal coronavirus vaccine
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/variants-emerge-us-government-turns-attention-universal-coronavirus/story?id=82469854
GIST	<p>At the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine makers raced to design a shot that perfectly matched the new virus's genetic code. Their efforts were successful, resulting in highly effective vaccines in record time.</p> <p>But the virus has continued to evolve into new, concerning variants, each with a slightly different genetic code. Although current vaccines still work well against new variants, they are no longer a perfect match.</p> <p>Vaccine makers like Pfizer and Moderna are now exploring tweaked booster shots to match the now-dominant omicron variant, but the U.S. government is aggressively pursuing a different approach: a pan-coronavirus vaccine that would work equally well against any COVID-19 variant.</p> <p>"Since September of 2020 there have been five SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern -- alpha, beta, gamma, delta and now, the current, omicron," Dr. Anthony Fauci said at a White House task force briefing Wednesday. "So, obviously, innovative approaches are needed."</p> <p>Fauci, who heads up the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has issued \$43 million in research grants across several academic institutions to support development of a pan-coronavirus vaccine, sometimes called a "universal" coronavirus vaccine.</p> <p>The idea, scientists say, is to create a vaccine that works as a generalist rather than a specialist. A pan-coronavirus vaccine will be designed using features of the virus's genetic code that are shared universally across all different versions of the virus -- and hopefully, any new versions that will emerge.</p> <p>Several research groups are already working on a pan-coronavirus vaccine, including scientists at the California Institute of Technology, Duke University, University of Washington, Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and the University of Wisconsin, Madison.</p> <p>Stéphane Bancel, Moderna's CEO, said in a statement Wednesday that the company may incorporate the omicron-specific booster into its "multivalent" booster program, which seeks to create a single shot that would work against at least two major variants.</p> <p>But scientists at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research are arguably the furthest along. The Army vaccine appears to work well in monkeys, and is now being tested for safety in a phase 1 study in human volunteers.</p> <p>In a rare look inside the Walter Reed laboratories last year, ABC News' Bob Woodruff spoke to a team of Army scientists hopeful that their vaccine candidate would work not only against COVID-19 variants, but also against related coronaviruses, like those that caused the SARS-1 and MERS outbreaks in 2003 and 2012, respectively.</p>

	<p>But designing a pan-coronavirus vaccine is no easy feat. Scientists say it could take months, even years, to find a vaccine that works equally well against multiple coronavirus strains.</p> <p>"I don't want anyone to think that pan-coronavirus vaccines are literally around the corner in a month or two," Fauci said. Current vaccines dramatically reduce the risk of hospitalization and severe illness, even against new variants like omicron. And crucially, they are available today.</p> <p>"Do not wait to receive your primary vaccine regimen," Fauci said. "If you are vaccinated, please get your booster if you are eligible."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Vaccine mandate health workers deadline
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/vaccine-mandate-kick-wave-health-workers-82492057
GIST	<p>Health care workers in about half the states face a Thursday deadline to get their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine under a Biden administration mandate that will be rolled out across the rest of the country in the coming weeks.</p> <p>While the requirement is welcomed by some, others fear it will worsen already serious staff shortages if employees quit rather than comply.</p> <p>And in some Republican-led states that have taken a stand against vaccine mandates, hospitals and nursing homes could find themselves caught between conflicting state and federal demands.</p> <p>"We would like to see staff vaccinated. We think that it's the safest option for residents, which is our biggest concern," said Marjorie Moore, executive director of VOYCE, a St. Louis County, Missouri, nonprofit that works on behalf of nursing home residents. "But not having staff is also a really big concern, because the neglect that happens as a result of that is severe and very scary."</p> <p>The mandate affects a wide swath of the health care industry, covering doctors, nurses, technicians, aides and even volunteers at hospitals, nursing homes, home-health agencies and other providers that participate in the federal Medicare or Medicaid programs.</p> <p>It comes as many places are stretched thin by the omicron surge, which is putting record numbers of people in the hospital with COVID-19 while sickening many health workers.</p> <p>Nationwide, about 81% of nursing home staff members already were fully vaccinated as of earlier this month, ranging from a high of 98% in Rhode Island to a low of 67% in Missouri, according to the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. The data is unclear about the vaccination levels in hospitals and other health care sites.</p> <p>The mandate ultimately will cover 10.4 million health care workers at 76,000 facilities.</p> <p>It is taking effect first in jurisdictions that didn't challenge the requirement in court. Those include some of the biggest states, with some of the largest populations of senior citizens, among them: California, Florida, New York and Pennsylvania.</p> <p>"There absolutely have been employee resignations because of vaccination requirements," said Catherine Barbieri, a Philadelphia attorney at Fox Rothschild who represents health care providers. But "I think it's relatively small."</p> <p>At Wilson Medical Center in rural Neodesha, Kansas, three of the roughly 180 employees are quitting, and several others have sought exemptions from the vaccine mandate, said hospital spokeswoman Janice Reese.</p>

"We are very fortunate that that is all we are losing," she said, noting that the hospital was not in favor of the mandate. "We didn't feel like it was our place to actually try to tell a person what they had to do."

Reese said the vaccine requirement could also make it more difficult for the hospital to fill vacancies.

In Florida, medical centers find themselves caught between dueling federal and state vaccination policies. They could lose federal funding for not adhering to the Biden administration mandate, but could get hit with fines for running afoul of state law.

Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican who has waged a legal campaign against coronavirus mandates, last year signed legislation that forces businesses with vaccine requirements to let workers opt out for medical reasons, religious beliefs, immunity from a previous infection, regular testing or an agreement to wear protective gear. Businesses that fail to comply can be fined \$10,000 to \$50,000 per violation.

Asked if the state would pursue fines against hospitals that enforce the federal mandate, a spokeswoman for the Florida attorney general said all employee complaints "will be thoroughly reviewed by our office."

Some states already have their own vaccine requirements for health care workers. In California, for example, they have been required to be fully vaccinated since Sept. 30 and must get a booster by Feb. 1.

The federal mandate is "better late than never," said Sal Rosselli, president of the National Union of Healthcare Workers, which represents about 15,000 people in California. "But if it happened sooner, we wouldn't have gone through the surge, and a lot more people would be alive today."

The government said it will begin enforcing the first-dose vaccine requirement Feb. 14 in two dozen other states where injunctions were lifted when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the mandate two weeks ago. The requirement will kick in on Feb. 22 in Texas, which had filed suit separately.

In Missouri, one nursing home served notice this week that it intends to take advantage of a state rule that allows facilities to close for up to two years if they are short-staffed because of the vaccine requirement.

"Obviously we are proponents of vaccines," said Lisa Cox, a spokeswoman for the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. But "throughout all of this, we knew that mandating it would be a negative impact really on our health care system ... just because of crippling staffing levels."

Cox identified the facility that was closing as Cedarcrest Manor, in the eastern Missouri city of Washington. She said there are just 42 patients in the 177-bed facility amid the staffing shortages. A woman who answered the phone at the facility took a message but couldn't immediately comment.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services ultimately could cut off funding to places that fail to comply with the mandate. But it plans to begin enforcement with encouragement rather than a heavy hand.

CMS guidance documents indicate it will grant leniency to places that have at least 80% compliance and an improvement plan in place, and it will seek to prod others.

"The overarching goal is to get providers over that finish line and not be cutting off federal dollars," said MaryBeth Musumeci, a Medicaid expert with the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation.

The states affected on Thursday are: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin, along with the District of Columbia and U.S. territories.

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HEADLINE	01/26 OPCW: chem agent in 2015 Syria attack
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/watchdog-chemical-agent-2015-attack-syria-82483672

GIST	<p>THE HAGUE, Netherlands -- An investigation by the global chemical weapons watchdog has found “reasonable grounds to believe” that a blistering agent was used during the shelling of a Syrian town in 2015, the organization said Wednesday.</p> <p>The report by the Fact-Finding Mission of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons said the chemical was likely used as a weapon on Sept. 1, 2015, in Marea, between the northwestern city of Aleppo and the Turkish border.</p> <p>It said a probe into another incident two days later did not find sufficient evidence to conclusively establish if chemical weapons were used.</p> <p>A 2015 report by the same mission said that sulfur mustard was very likely used in Marea days earlier. A U.S. diplomat said that at the time the town was the scene of fighting between Syrian opposition forces and the Islamic State group.</p> <p>The Fact-Finding Mission is not mandated to apportion blame for the use of chemicals as weapons. Earlier investigations by the mission have established that chlorine, sulfur mustard, and sarin have been used as chemical weapons during the grinding conflict in Syria.</p> <p>A separate investigative panel set up by the watchdog has twice said it found “reasonable grounds to believe” that Syrian government forces used chemical weapons. Damascus denies using such weapons.</p> <p>Syria joined the Hague-based OPCW in 2013 under intense pressure from the West after a deadly poison gas attack on a Damascus suburb. As part of the process of joining, it submitted a list of chemical weapons and precursor chemicals that were quickly removed from the country and destroyed under international supervision. However, unanswered questions remain about whether the Syrian government declared all of its stockpiles.</p> <p>The latest fact-finding mission report was passed on to the OPCW member states and the United Nations Security Council.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Croatia buys US Bradley fighting vehicles
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/croatia-announces-deal-buy-us-bradley-fighting-vehicles-82484599
GIST	<p>ZAGREB, Croatia -- Croatia has reached an agreement with the United States to buy 89 Bradley vehicles as part of cooperation with Washington and plans as a member of NATO to form an infantry brigade, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said Wednesday.</p> <p>Croatia's government is expected to formally endorse the \$196 million (173 million-euro) deal at a session on Thursday. Plenkovic said the price includes an American donation of \$51 million (45 million euros).</p> <p>“This is a confirmation of good cooperation and I believe that in this way, we have added another piece to the mosaic of our cooperation,” Plenkovic told reporters. “The Croatian army will achieve a new level of quality.”</p> <p>Croatia has been negotiating the purchase of U.S. Bradley M2A2 infantry fighting vehicles since 2017. Croatia will receive 62 fighting vehicles, 22 vehicles for reserve parts and five training vehicles.</p> <p>Plenkovic said they will starting arriving in 2023 and will be serviced in Croatia in the future.</p> <p>“I think we made a good deal with the American side,” Plenkovic said.</p>

	Croatia also purchased 12 Rafale fighter jets last year from France. Croatia, which is a member of NATO and the European Union, is in a mini arms race with neighboring Russian ally Serbia amid simmering tensions in the post-war Balkan region.
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HEADLINE	01/26 Lebanon: Jordan electricity via Syria deal
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/lebanon-receive-jordan-electricity-syria-deal-signed-82480750
GIST	<p>BEIRUT -- Lebanon signed deals on Wednesday to purchase electricity from Jordan via Syria to help the small Mediterranean country deal with its crippling energy crisis.</p> <p>The deals are expected to bring Lebanon up to 250 megawatts of electricity a day within two months, enough for about two hours of power a day. The electricity will be transmitted through Syria. The World Bank is expected to finance the deals, and negotiations are underway.</p> <p>Lebanon's Energy Minister Walid Fayyad said he expects financing negotiations to conclude in two months.</p> <p>"After signing today, we are left with the financing through the World Bank, something I will work on as soon as possible. The details will be clear in the next two months," Fayyad told reporters during the signing ceremony. "We don't want to promise the Lebanese people that as soon as we sign electricity will come."</p> <p>Washington has offered reassurances to Lebanon and Egypt that it supports regional efforts to help Lebanon deal with its energy crisis, while reviewing such agreements to ensure that no sanctions are triggered.</p> <p>A State Department spokesperson said no Syria sanctions have been waived. The spokesperson added that Washington has been in touch with the Lebanese and Jordanian governments to understand how the agreements will be structured and financed to ensure it is in line with U.S. policy and addresses any potential sanctions concerns.</p> <p>"While we understand that the delivery of electricity must necessarily transit the Syrian grid, it's important to underscore our robust sanctions regime against the Assad government remain fully in force. We have not lifted or waived any Syria-related sanctions in this case, or any other," the spokesperson said on condition of anonymity in lines with regulations.</p> <p>The energy crunch is at the heart of Lebanon's snowballing economic crisis, described as one of the world's worst since the 1850s. A massive public deficit and a crashing national currency have made shortages perennial amid continuously soaring prices.</p> <p>Lebanon's electricity company offers only a couple of hours of power a day, and residents have heavily relied on costly and polluting private generators. The aging national grid has not been able to provide 24-hour electricity in the country since the end of the civil war in 1990, and fuel oil subsidies for the state electricity company have been the main driver of the country's massive national debt.</p> <p>Shortages of medicine, fuel and basic supplies have often brought the country to standstill and driven more than half of the population deep into poverty. Political disagreements have delayed efforts to form a government to negotiate a rescue package with international financial institutions. The government is currently negotiating a draft budget.</p> <p>Fayyad praised what he described as speedy Arab cooperation that has enabled the transmission of electricity in two rather than six months.</p>

	<p>Jordanian Energy Minister Saleh Kharabsheh said the agreement with Lebanon reinforces cooperation between the neighboring countries and comes at a “critical time for Lebanon.” He called it a deal to help Lebanon, and not a “commercial deal” — suggesting it is only covering its cost.</p> <p>“This is not only to the benefit of Lebanon but in the interest of all. Any cooperation between Arab countries is an interest for all,” Kharabsheh said.</p> <p>Lebanon has also negotiated receiving Egyptian natural gas, set to be transmitted through Jordan and Syria. Another deal with Iraq helps it secure fuel for its power plants.</p> <p>Speaking in Beirut after the signing ceremony, Syria's Energy Minister Ghassan al-Zamil said the U.S. sanctions, known as the Caesar act, are of no concern to his government.</p> <p>“It is imposed by a country. It is not a law,” he told reporters. “What concerns us in this deal, despite the Syrian government putting up with a lot of expenses to fix the pipelines which were not a priority for the government or the electricity ministry, is the insistence of the government to offer more to support Arab cooperation.”</p> <p>Syria's government has been largely boycotted by its Arab neighbors since the start of the war in that country in 2011. Most countries blamed Assad's government for the war's atrocities. But as the war dies down and Assad remains in power, many Arab neighbors have begun reconsidering their ties with Damascus, re-opening their embassies and exchanging visits.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 EU leaders worried by rise in anti-Semitism
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/eu-leaders-worried-rise-antisemitism-holocaust-denial-82488324
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS -- European Union leaders pledged Wednesday to confront the rise of antisemitism and Holocaust denial witnessed during the coronavirus pandemic, on the eve of the annual commemorations of Auschwitz's liberation.</p> <p>European Council President Charles Michel said the lessons of the Holocaust are now “more relevant than ever.”</p> <p>“First, because Jewish people feel threatened, and they are threatened,” he said. “They are even attacked in Europe. Just because they are Jewish. We do not accept this. We will never accept it.”</p> <p>Michel spoke at an online event organized by the European Jewish Congress, which was also attended by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Parliament President Roberta Metsola.</p> <p>The Commission — the EU's executive branch — presented last year a new strategy to better tackle hate speech, raise awareness about Jewish life, protect places of worship and ensure that the Holocaust isn't forgotten. According to Europe's Fundamental Rights Agency, nine out of 10 Jews think antisemitism has increased in their country and is a serious problem.</p> <p>With the wide circulation of false information about the Holocaust on the internet, European Jewish Congress President Moshe Kantor cited the big amount of time spent online during the coronavirus pandemic as one of the reasons for the rise in antisemitism.</p> <p>He asked EU leaders to increase their efforts to connect with European youth to make them more aware of the Holocaust.</p>

“We have to understand better their concerns and aspirations and speak to them in their language,” he said. “There has been a tsunami of lies about Jews, Israel and the Holocaust over the last couple of years, so we have to create new strategies to reach those who are consuming this information innocently.”

With France holding the EU's rotating presidency, the European Jewish Congress' ceremony focused on the Holocaust is in France, on the 80th anniversary of the Velodrome d'Hiver round-up, a mass arrest of Jews by French police in Paris in 1942.

French President Emmanuel Macron said he has taken action to dissolve groups promoting hatred and deplored that “falsifications of history are back.”

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, many International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemorations Thursday will be held online this year again. A small ceremony, however, will take place at the site of the former Auschwitz death camp, where World War II Nazi German forces killed 1.1 million people in occupied Poland. The memorial site was closed earlier in the pandemic but reopened in June.

The U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution in November 2005 establishing the annual commemoration and chose Jan. 27, the day that Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated by Soviet troops in 1945.

In all, about 6 million European Jews and millions of other people were killed by the Germans and their collaborators during the Holocaust. Some 1.5 million were children.

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HEADLINE	01/26 EU warns Sahel over Russian mercenaries
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/eu-g5-countries-meet-amid-turmoil-mali-burkina-82484292
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS -- The European Union on Wednesday warned countries of the north African Sahel against hiring Russian mercenaries, and underlined that it stands ready to impose sanctions on anyone interfering with the transition to civilian rule in Mali.</p> <p>Mali's interim government has accepted the presence of Wagner Group security contractors on its territory. Last month, the EU slapped sanctions on eight people and three oil companies linked to Wagner, which is accused of rights abuses in the Central African Republic, Libya and Syria.</p> <p>The EU warning came in a series of meetings between the bloc's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, and the foreign ministers of Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. A full meeting of the G5 Sahel countries, including Burkina Faso, did not take place due to differences over who could take part.</p> <p>Borrell said he underlined the EU's “deep concern following the confirmed deployment of Russian mercenaries in Mali and the great danger that this poses to civilian populations. This group's methods are incompatible with our collective efforts on security and development.”</p> <p>In a long conversation with Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop, Borrell insisted that “the European Union wants to remain engaged in Mali and the Sahel but not at any price.”</p> <p>Of chief concern for the Europeans in the strategically important but unstable Sahel region, which has proven a fertile breeding ground for extremists, is the decision by Mali's interim government to delay elections due next month until 2026.</p> <p>The West African regional group ECOWAS imposed tougher economic sanctions on Mali in response. The EU has set up a framework for imposing its own measures on the authorities for holding up the political transition but has not yet pulled the trigger.</p>

	<p>Mali has struggled to contain an extremist insurgency since 2012. Rebels were forced from power in northern cities with the help of a French-led military operation, but they regrouped in the desert and began attacking the Malian army and its allies.</p> <p>Insecurity has worsened with attacks on civilians and United Nations peacekeepers. The EU has also been training the Mali armed forces and plans to continue to do so for now despite the severe instability and political upheaval.</p> <p>Borrell said he demanded “concrete guarantees” from Diop to ensure that European help to Mali’s security forces can continue. He called for a “credible electoral timetable” and said the EU “is united in its position to impose individual sanctions on those who hinder the transition process in Mali.”</p> <p>Burkina Faso’s takeover this week by the Patriotic Movement for Safeguarding and Restoration was also high on the meeting agenda. Borrell condemned the coup and underlined that the EU demands “the respect of the republic’s institutions and a rapid return to constitutional order.”</p> <p>He also called for “the immediate release of all people who are illegally detained, to start with President (Roch Marc Christian) Kaboré himself.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Canada expands Ukraine military training
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/canada-extends-expands-military-training-mission-ukraine-82495096
GIST	<p>TORONTO -- Canada is extending its mission to train Ukrainian soldiers by three years and plans to enlarge the operation, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Wednesday.</p> <p>Trudeau said he has authorized the military to deploy 60 more personnel to join 200 troops already on the ground, with further capacity to increase that number up to 400. It's part of a \$340 million Canadian (US\$268 million) commitment.</p> <p>Trudeau said Russia is using its military might and heft to bully and threaten an independent democracy in an effort to try to get Ukraine to bow to its will.</p> <p>“It’s a threat not just to Ukrainians. It is a threat to all of us who believe in the rights of citizens to elect their governments and pick the direction of their country,” Trudeau said.</p> <p>“We are seeing around the world right now a back sliding of democracy, an attack on democratic principles in many different forms. But the direct threat of a Russian invasion, to take control of Ukraine, to take away the choice of Ukrainian people to chose their future ... It’s something that concerns all of us who cherish democracy.”</p> <p>Trudeau said the effort also includes a provision of non-lethal equipment, intelligence sharing and support to combat cyberattacks.</p> <p>The Canadian mission is intended to support Ukrainian forces so the country can defend its sovereignty, security and territorial integrity, the prime minister said.</p> <p>“This is not a combat mission, this is a training mission. The Canadian military will be there to advise and assist. We will continue training,” Trudeau said. “In the event of a Russian incursion or invasion into Ukraine we will ensure that Canadian military remain safe.”</p> <p>Trudeau said Defense Minister Anita Anand will travel to Latvia and Ukraine to visit with Canadian soldiers in the coming days. Anand said Canada has trained over 30,000 soldiers in Ukraine.</p> <p>There are more than 1.3 million people with Ukrainian origin in Canada.</p>

HEADLINE	01/27 Seoul: NKorea fires 2 ballistic missiles
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/seoul-korea-fires-projectile-6th-launch-month-82496540
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea -- North Korea on Thursday fired two suspected ballistic missiles into the sea in its sixth round of weapons launches this month, South Korea's military said.</p> <p>Experts say North Korea's unusually fast pace in testing activity underscores an intent to pressure the Biden administration over long-stalled negotiations aimed at exchanging a release of crippling U.S.-led sanctions against the North and the North's denuclearization steps.</p> <p>The renewed pressure comes as the pandemic further shakes the North's economy, which was already battered by crippling U.S.-led sanctions over its nuclear weapons program and decades of mismanagement by its own government.</p> <p>South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the weapons, which were likely short-range, were launched five minutes apart from the eastern coastal town of Hamhung and flew 190 kilometers (118 miles) on an apogee of 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) before landing at sea.</p> <p>Aviation authorities issued a Notice to Airmen, or NOTAM, for pilots operating in South Korean airspace, advising them of a "missile launched from North Korea" and that they maintain close communication with air traffic controls, according to the website of South Korea's Office of Civil Aviation.</p> <p>The U.S. Indo Pacific Command said the latest launches, while highlighting the destabilizing impact of North Korea's weapons program, didn't pose an "immediate threat to U.S. personnel or territory, or to our allies.</p> <p>Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida confirmed there were no reports of damage to vessel and aircraft around the Japanese coast. He called the North's repeated missile firings as "extremely regrettable" and violations of U.N. Security Council resolutions.</p> <p>Senior South Korean security and military officials gathered for an emergency National Security Council meeting where they expressed strong regret over the North's continuing launches and urged Pyongyang to recommit to dialogue, Seoul's presidential office said.</p> <p>The North also last week issued a veiled threat to resume the testing of nuclear explosives and long-range missiles targeting the American homeland, which leader Kim Jong Un suspended in 2018 while initiating diplomacy with the United States.</p> <p>Kim's high-stakes summitry with then-President Donald Trump derailed in 2019 after the Americans rejected North Korea's demands for major sanctions relief in exchange for a partial surrender of its nuclear capabilities.</p> <p>Some experts say North Korea could dramatically escalate weapons demonstrations after the Winter Olympics, which begin Feb. 4 in China, the North's main ally and economic lifeline.</p> <p>They say Pyongyang's leadership likely feels it could use a dramatic provocation to move the needle with the Biden administration, which has been preoccupied with bigger adversaries including China and Russia.</p> <p>The Biden administration has offered open-ended talks but showed no willingness to ease sanctions unless Kim takes real steps to abandon the nuclear weapons and missiles he sees as his strongest guarantee of survival.</p> <p>The North has been ramping up its testing activity since last fall, demonstrating various missiles and delivery systems apparently designed to overwhelm missile defense systems in the region.</p>

Experts say Kim is trying to apply more pressure on rivals Washington and Seoul to accept it as a nuclear power in hopes of winning relief from economic sanctions and convert the diplomacy with Washington into mutual arms-reduction negotiations.

Thursday's launch came two days after South Korea's military detected the North flight-testing two suspected cruise missile at an unspecified inland area.

North Korea opened 2022 with a pair of test-firings of a purported hypersonic missile, which Kim described as an asset that would remarkably bolster his nuclear "war deterrent."

The North also this month test-fired two different types of short-range ballistic missiles it has developed since 2019 that are designed to be maneuverable and fly at low altitudes, which experts say potentially improve their chances of evading and defeating missile defense systems.

In a ruling party meeting attended by Kim last week, the North accused the Biden administration of hostility and threats and said it will consider "all temporally-suspended activities" it had paused during its diplomacy with the Trump administration, in an apparent threat to resume testing of nuclear explosives and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Pyongyang's Foreign Ministry had earlier warned of "stronger and certain reaction" after the Biden administration imposed fresh sanctions following the North's second hypersonic test on Jan. 11.

The U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on five North Koreans over their roles in obtaining equipment and technology for the country's missile programs, while the State Department ordered sanctions against another North Korean, a Russian man and a Russian company for their broader support of North Korea's weapons activities.

However, Washington's efforts to seek new U.N. Security Council sanctions against the five North Koreans sanctioned by the Treasury Department were blocked last week by China and Russia, which have called for the U.N. to end key sanctions against the North, citing its economic difficulties.

"Despite efforts to strengthen sanctions, Washington's responses to North Korean launches this month are nowhere near its reaction to Pyongyang's provocations in 2017," when the North staged an unusually provocative run in nuclear and ICBM tests, said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.

"U.S. policy has become more measured and coordinated but is still inadequate for changing North Korean behavior. The Biden administration has other priorities, ranging from pandemic recovery at home to confronting Russia over Ukraine, Iran regarding its nuclear program, and China across the board," he said.

Despite international concerns over its weapons activity, North Korea will still get to chair a U.N. disarmament forum during a one-month presidency between May 30 to June 24, according to a U.N. statement.

The U.N. Conference on Disarmament, which has 65 member states and focuses on nuclear disarmament issues, says the conference's presidency rotates among member states.

U.N. Watch, a Geneva-based activist group, called for the U.S. and European ambassadors to walk out of the conference during North Korea's presidency, saying that the country threatens to attack other U.N. member states with missiles and commits atrocities against its own people.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Pakistan: violence erupts at port city
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/violence-erupts-rally-pakistans-port-city-killing-82503533
GIST	KARACHI, Pakistan -- Police in Pakistan's largest city of Karachi clashed overnight with activists demanding the repeal of a law to limit powers of local mayors, killing one, officials said Thursday.

	<p>The violence erupted when police swung batons and fired tear gas to prevent rallygoers from marching towards government offices in the southern port city, drawing nationwide condemnation across the political spectrum.</p> <p>The Muttahida Qaumi Movement, or MQM, told reporters that party member Mohammad Aslam died at a hospital after being injured in the ensuing crush with police. Women and children were also among the dozens of injured.</p> <p>MQM mainly represents ethnic Mohajirs, who fled to Pakistan from India during 1947's partition, and it dominates politics in Karachi, the capital of southern Sindh province. It is an ally in the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan.</p> <p>Thousands are expected to attend the activist's funeral on Thursday, and the MQM has called for another day of protests.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 NKorea slowly reopens after 2yr-lockdown
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/korea-harsh-year-lockdown-slowly-reopens-border-82502869
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea -- After spending two years in a strict lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea may finally be opening up — slowly. The reason could reflect a growing sense of recognition by the leadership that the nation badly needs to win outside economic relief.</p> <p>The North's tentative reopening is seen in the apparent resumption of North Korean freight train traffic into neighboring China. But it comes even as Pyongyang has staged several weapons tests, the latest being two suspected ballistic missiles on Thursday, and issued a veiled threat about resuming tests of nuclear explosives and long-range missiles targeting the American homeland.</p> <p>The apparently divided message — opening the border, slightly, on one hand, while also militarily pressuring Washington over a prolonged freeze in nuclear negotiations — likely signals a realization that the pandemic has worsened an economy already damaged by decades of mismanagement and crippling U.S.-led sanctions over North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles.</p> <p>According to South Korean estimates, North Korea's crucial trade with its ally China shrank by about 80% in 2020 before plunging again by two-thirds in the first nine months of 2021 as it sealed its borders.</p> <p>The partial reopening of the border also raises questions about how North Korea plans to receive and administer vaccines following a yearlong delay in its immunization campaign.</p> <p>“North Korea could end up being the planet's last battlefield in the war against COVID-19. Even the poorest countries in Africa have received outside aid and vaccines or acquired immunity through infection, but North Korea is the only country in the world without a real plan,” said analyst Lim Soo-ho at Seoul's Institute of National Security Strategy, a think tank run by South Korea's main spy agency.</p> <p>Commercial satellite images indicate that the first North Korean freight train that crossed the Yalu River last week then returned from China and unloaded cargo at an airfield in the border town of Uiju, according to the North Korea-focused 38 North website. The airfield is believed to have been converted to disinfect imported supplies, which may include food and medicine.</p> <p>China's Foreign Ministry has said trade between the border towns will be maintained while pandemic controls stay in place. But South Korean officials say it isn't immediately clear whether the North is fully reopening land trade with China, which is a major economic lifeline.</p> <p>Some South Korean media have speculated North Korea may have temporarily reopened the railroad between Sinuiju and China's Dandong just to receive food and essential goods meant as gifts for its people</p>

during important holidays, including the 80th birth anniversary of leader Kim Jong Un's father next month, and the 110th birth anniversary in April of his grandfather who founded North Korea.

Many experts, however, say it's more likely that the pandemic's economic strain is forcing North Korea to explore a phased reopening of its borders that it could quickly close if greater risks emerge.

Following two years of extreme isolation and economic decay, Pyongyang's leadership is looking for more sustainable ways to deal with a pandemic that could last years.

While North Korea has so far claimed zero virus infections, it also calls its antivirus campaign a matter of "national existence." It has severely restricted cross-border traffic and trade, banned tourists and kicked out diplomats, and is even believed to have ordered troops to shoot-on-sight any trespassers.

Pyongyang's leadership knows that a major COVID-19 outbreak would be devastating because of North Korea's poor health care system and may even fan social unrest when combined with its chronic food shortage, experts say.

South Korean officials have said that North Korea established disinfection zones in recent months at border towns and seaports. The World Health Organization said in October that the North had started receiving shipments of medical supplies transported by sea from China through its port of Nampo.

The pandemic is another difficulty for Kim, who gained little from his nuclear disarmament-for-aid diplomacy with former U.S. President Donald Trump. Those talks imploded in 2019.

Kim in 2020 acknowledged that his previous economic plans weren't working and opened 2021 by issuing a new development plan for the next five years.

But North Korea's review of its 2021 economy during a December ruling party meeting indicated that the first year of the plan was disappointing, Lim said. A rare piece of tangible progress was a modest increase in food production, which rebounded from a 2020 marked by crop-killing storms and floods.

North Korea's resumed trade with China will be driven by imports. Most of North Korea's major export activities are blocked under international sanctions tightened since 2016 after Kim accelerated nuclear and missile development.

The North may focus on importing fertilizer to boost food production. It also needs construction materials for development projects important to Kim. Factory goods and machinery are crucial to revive industrial production, which has been decimated by two years of halted trade.

Experts, however, still expect North Korea's trade with China to be significantly smaller than pre-pandemic levels.

North Korea can't immediately purchase a huge amount of goods because the multiyear toll of sanctions and pandemic-related difficulties has thinned out foreign currency reserves.

"Still, it's clear that North Korea isn't a country that can survive without imports for two or three years, so it's certain they will attempt to slowly increase imports within a limited scope," said Go Myong-hyun, an analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

North Korea has so far shunned millions of vaccine shots offered by the U.N.-backed COVAX distribution program, possibly reflecting an unease toward accepting international monitors. But the country may still seek help from China and Russia to inoculate workers, officials and troops in border areas as it proceeds with a phased resumption of trade, said Hong Min, an analyst at Seoul's Korea Institute for National Unification.

	<p>North Korea may also be forced to adopt a scaled-back vaccination program by tightly restricting access to border areas and providing regular testing and vaccination for border workers.</p> <p>“It could take nearly 100 million shots to fully vaccinate the North Korean population of more than 25 million, and the country will never get anything close to that,” Lim said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Canada police fear violence trucker protest
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/canada-police-fear-violence-trucker-vaccine-protest-82497084
GIST	<p>OTTAWA, Ontario -- A convoy of truckers set to descend on Ottawa to protest a vaccine mandate for cross-border drivers is prompting Canadian police to prepare for violence and politicians to warn against escalating rhetoric linked to the demonstration.</p> <p>Ottawa police Chief Peter Soly said Wednesday officers had been in contact with protest leaders whom he said have been co-operative and shared their plans. But Deputy Chief Steve Bell voiced concern about “parallel groups” that intelligence suggests will also turn up to the protest.</p> <p>The truckers are protesting a new requirement that truckers entering Canada be fully immunized as of Jan. 15. The United States has imposed the same requirement on truckers entering that country.</p> <p>The Canadian Trucking Alliance has estimated that about 15% truckers in Canada — as many as 16,000 — are not fully vaccinated against COVID-19.</p> <p>Some with far-right views have latched onto the protest. One online video includes a man expressing hope the rally will turn into the Canadian equivalent of the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol by supporters of former president Donald Trump.</p> <p>Donald Trump Jr. took to social media Tuesday to endorse the Canadian truck convoy’s fight against “tyranny” and to urge Americans to follow suit.</p> <p>At the meeting in Ottawa, police disclosed they are preparing for a range of scenarios including the potential for violent outbreaks. Police say they are planning for the arrival of between 1,000 and 2,000 demonstrators, but say the situation is “fluid” and changing by the hour.</p> <p>Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said there was a “small fringe minority who are on the way to Ottawa who are holding unacceptable views.”</p> <p>“What we are hearing from some people associated with this convoy is completely unacceptable,” he added.</p> <p>While police support the right to peaceful protest, officers would be prepared to move protesters out of the demonstration zone should the situation become violent or threatening, said Soly, the Ottawa police chief.</p> <p>Some supporters of the convoy, including some opposition Conservative lawmakers, have taken to social media to warn the vaccine mandate for truckers will leave store shelves empty.</p> <p>Transport Minister Omar Alghabra has assured Canadians there’s no reason to fear food shortages will result from a small minority of truck drivers refusing to comply with the vaccine mandate.</p> <p>Moreover, he said there’s been no “measurable impact” on the number of trucks crossing the border since the vaccine mandate went into effect on Jan. 15. Last week, he said almost 100,000 trucks crossed the border — about the same as usual for this time of year.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Fed signals rate hikes coming ‘soon’
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SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Business/fed-signals-rate-hikes-coming-amid-inflation-concerns/story?id=82483950
GIST	<p>Officials at the Federal Reserve on Wednesday signaled that they could "soon" raise interest rates for the first time in three years, as inflation concerns cast a shadow over the pandemic-battered economy.</p> <p>The central bankers said in a statement Wednesday that they were leaving rates unchanged for now, at near-zero levels, but with a recovering labor market and the threat of inflation, this will likely change in the near future.</p> <p>"With inflation well above 2 percent and a strong labor market, the Committee expects it will soon be appropriate to raise the target range for the federal funds rate," the Fed said in a statement Wednesday.</p> <p>Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said during his closely watched news conference Wednesday that the Fed's "policy has been adapting to the evolving economic environment and will continue to do so," alluding to the backdrop of elevated inflation and labor market gains.</p> <p>"Economic activity expanded at a robust pace last year, reflecting progress on vaccinations and the reopening of the economy," Powell said. "Indeed, the economy has shown great strength and resilience in the face of the ongoing pandemic."</p> <p>Powell said the sharp rise in COVID-19 cases associated with the omicron variant likely will weigh on economic growth in the short term, but he expressed hope, as health experts have suggested, that the omicron variant hasn't been as virulent as previous strains, and that it's expected for cases to drop off more rapidly.</p> <p>Powell added that "inflation remains well above our longer run goal of 2%," which it notably has for some time now. He attributed this largely to supply and demand imbalances related to the pandemic and the reopening of the economy.</p> <p>"These problems have been larger and longer lasting than anticipated, exacerbated by waves of the virus," Powell said Wednesday. "While the drivers of higher inflation have been predominantly connected to the dislocations caused by the pandemic, price increases have now spread to a broader range of goods and services. Wages have also risen briskly, and we are attentive to the risks that persistent real wage growth in excess of productivity could put upward pressure on inflation."</p> <p>The Fed chair said that they expect inflation to decline over the course of the year, but signaled that the central bankers are taking this issue seriously -- they're very aware of the pain it causes for consumers and will be "watching carefully" to see how the economy evolves.</p> <p>"We understand that high inflation imposes significant hardship, especially on those least able to meet the higher costs of essentials like food, housing and transportation," Powell added. "In addition, we believe that the best thing we can do to support continued labor market gains is to promote a long expansion and that will require price stability. We're committed to our price stability goal."</p> <p>Powell continued: "We will use our tools both to support the economy and a strong labor market, and to prevent higher inflation from becoming entrenched."</p> <p>U.S. markets tumbled after the Fed announcement. The Dow Jones Industrial Average reversed earlier gains, losing 131 points, or about 0.38%. The S&P 500 shed 0.15%, and the Nasdaq was little changed, gaining 0.02% on the day after being up by more than 3%.</p> <p>"It certainly looks like there's a correction underway -- who knows if it's going to be a short-term correction or a longer-term correction," Chris Campbell, chief strategist at the Kroll and former staff director of the Senate Finance Committee, told ABC News on Wednesday, discussing market reactions to the Fed's announcement.</p>

"Inflation is here to stay," he added. "People who've been in markets a long time know that the whatever the Fed's going to do could have a negative impact on the markets" -- raising interest rates or tapering pandemic-era policies.

The Fed officials reiterated in their Wednesday statement that they expect to continue to taper their pandemic-era asset purchasing program meant to buoy the economy during the health crisis and end it completely by early March.

Overall, Campbell suggested market players should brace themselves for a bumpy ride ahead.

"I often point out that the average retail investor today has never really been in the public markets at a time when you've had hyperinflation or a Federal Reserve that's bent on getting that inflation under control," Campbell added. "So it's going to be really interesting to see, but I think it's going to be a very bumpy and lumpy year both in the markets and the economy."

Separately, the Fed officials noted in their latest policy statement that indicators of economic activity and employment have continued to strengthen.

"The sectors most adversely affected by the pandemic have improved in recent months but are being affected by the recent sharp rise in COVID-19 cases," the statement said. "Job gains have been solid in recent months, and the unemployment rate has declined substantially."

Still, the central bankers noted that supply and demand imbalances related to the pandemic and reopening of the economy "have continued to contribute to elevated levels of inflation," and that much of the economic recovery still remains at the mercy of the virus.

The unemployment rate as of last month fell to 3.9%, only slightly above the pre-pandemic rate of 3.5% in February 2020.

Soaring inflation, however, has thrown a new wrench into the economic recovery. Government data released earlier this month indicated that consumer prices have jumped 7% over the last 12 months, the largest one-year increase since 1982.

As for how inflation, and the Fed's efforts to combat it, would impact everyday Americans, Campbell echoed Powell's sentiments in saying low-income workers would be hit hardest.

"Inflation is a what I call 'a regressionary tax' -- that means that it's really felt most by those who can afford it least," Campbell told ABC News. Even a \$1 increase in gas prices "can really be significant in their ability to be able to go to work or put food in their kids' mouths or clothes on their backs."

At the same time, Fed policies to ameliorate inflation -- such as raising interest rates -- also hits this group harder.

"The same people will feel that challenge, maybe in different ways, as the Federal Reserve raises interest rates, and revolving lines of credit will become more expensive -- those who are living on credit or credit cards, those will become more expensive," Campbell explained. "Homes become unaffordable for most Americans, and so it really puts pressure on the lower end of the economic scale."

Campbell expressed hope that Powell and policymakers will do their best to ease this burden as they use their tools to stamp out inflation, but added that "there is no way to do it painlessly" and raising interest rates is "going to have some negative effect on the economy and on everyday Americans."

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HEADLINE	01/26 Ukraine calls out 'false flag' operation
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/ukrainian-government-calls-out-false-flag-operation-in-recent-data-wiping-attack/
GIST	<p>The Ukrainian government said today that it found evidence meant to connect the data wiping attack that hit its own systems two weeks ago to a pro-Ukrainian hacking group in what security researchers typically describe as a “false flag” meant to distract investigators from the real culprits of the attack.</p> <p>To better understand what the Ukrainian government is saying, a summary of the original attack is required, rewritten with the malware nomenclature and timeline presented by Ukrainian authorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• On the night between January 13 and January 14, unidentified attackers attempted to gain access and deface the websites of more than 70 Ukrainian government agencies.• The attack successfully defaced 22 websites and severely damaged six.• Most of the government sites were managed by a local IT firm named KitSoft and ran on top of the October CMS website builder.• The attackers used vulnerabilities in the CMS and KitSoft employee accounts to access servers hosting the sites to carry out the defacements.• Besides altering websites, the attackers also deployed a malware strain named WhisperGate on servers and government systems they had previously compromised months before.• This malware downloaded and ran two components.• The first was named BootPatch and worked by rewriting the master boot record (MBR) of an infected computer, preventing it from booting and showing a ransom demand instead.• The second component was named WhisperKill and worked by trashing files by rewriting their content with a 0xCC character sequence.• Because the attackers did not include a data recovery mechanism, the attack was deemed to have been intentionally designed to be destructive and subsequently blamed on hackers tied to the Russian government. <p>But in a report published today by one of the agencies investigating the attacks, Ukraine’s State Service for Communications and Information Protection (CIP) said that they found that the WhisperKill component contained more than 80% of code that was similar to a ransomware strain named WhiteBlackCrypt, suggesting that the attackers had re-used code from the public domain.</p> <p>But while this is a common tactic for nation-state threat actors, CIP doesn’t believe the choice to use code from WhiteBlackCrypt was an accident and was actually chosen on purpose, based on several factors. First, officials said pointed out that the WhiteBlackCrypt is known to use an ASCII depiction of a trident, Ukraine’s official coat of arms, in the ransom note it shows to users.</p> <p>Second, officials say the ransomware also reused the same Bitcoin address to gather ransom payments as an address that used in email bomb threats sent to Russian organizations in 2019. According to reports in Russian media, some of the funds gathered through this campaign were allegedly sent to a group associated with Ukrainian special services.</p> <p>Third, CIP says that several Russian Telegram channels have used these two incidents to incorrectly but formally link the WhiteBlackCrypt ransomware to Ukraine’s Special Services and Armed Forces.</p> <p>And last but not least, CIP says that an individual who posed as the same person who blackmailed Russian organizations in 2019 came back to life again in January 2022 when it mass-messed and urged Ukrainian organizations to mount attacks against Russia.</p> <p>All of this has led CIP and the Ukrainian government to believe that all of this is somehow a false flag operation meant to blame a “fake” pro-Ukrainian group for an attack on their own government, rather than the common assessment that Russian threat actors are behind the attack.</p> <p>“The deliberate use of the WhisperKill malware on January 13-14, 2022, which is morphologically similar to the WhiteBlackCrypt malware and manipulatively associated with the SSO of the Armed Forces of</p>

	Ukraine, is an attempt to provoke and distort reality in order to accuse Ukraine of attacks on January 13-14, 2022 year,” CIP officials said today.
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HEADLINE	01/26 'Dark Herring' billing malware on Androids
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/dark-herring-billing-malware-android/178032/
GIST	<p>Nearly 500 malicious apps lurking on the Google Play Store have successfully installed Dark Herring malware — a cash-stealer intended to add sneaky charges onto mobile carrier bills — on more than 100 million Android devices across the globe.</p> <p>That’s quite a school of fish.</p> <p>Dark Herring malware was discovered by a research team with Zimperium, who estimate the amount the campaign has been able to steal totals in the hundreds of millions, in increments of \$15 a month per victim. Google has since removed all 470 malicious applications from the Play Store, and the firm said the scam services are down, but any user with one of the apps already installed could still be actively victimized down the road. The apps are still available in third-party app stores too.</p> <p>Consumers across the world, particularly in under-banked areas, rely on direct carrier billing (DCB) as a mobile payment method, which adds charges for non-telecom services onto a consumer’s monthly phone bill. It’s a juicy target for adversaries.</p> <p>In this case, the errant \$15 charge isn’t necessarily enough for an end user to notice it for several months, but multiplied across more than 100 million accounts, the ill-gotten gains quickly added up, the report explained.</p> <p>“The download statistics reveal that more than 105 million Android devices had this malware installed, falling victim to this campaign globally, potentially suffering incalculable financial losses,” Zimperium’s report said. “The cybercriminal group behind this campaign has built a stable cash flow of illicit funds from these victims, generating millions in recurring revenue each month, with the total amount stolen potentially well into the hundreds of millions.”</p> <p>The campaign was first detected back in March of 2020 and ran actively through last November, the report said.</p> <p>The Zimperium analysts who identified Dark Herring said that the scamware is likely the work of a new group, which uses novel techniques and infrastructure.</p> <p>Dark Herring’s World Domination</p> <p>Dark Herring’s triumph was the result of a combination of savvy tactics, the analysts said; namely, the use of geo-targeting to deliver the application in the victim’s native language.</p> <p>“This social-engineering trick is exceptionally successful and effective as users are generally more comfortable with sharing information to a website in their local language,” the team added. “The campaign is exceptionally versatile, targeting mobile users from 70+ countries by changing the application’s language, and displaying the content according to the current user’s IP address.”</p> <p>The group behind Dark Herring also managed to stand up 470 high-quality applications that passed official app store muster, which demonstrates that this is a sophisticated operation, analysts noted. The apps all functioned as advertised, and were spread over a wide range of categories.</p> <p>“Producing a large number of malicious applications and submitting them to app stores points to an extensive, concerted effort by a well-organized group,” the report explained. “These apps are not just clones of each other or other apps, but are uniquely produced at a high rate to deceive traditional security toolsets and the potential victims.”</p>

Besides a robust infrastructure, the Dark Herring's campaign uses proxies as first-stage URLs to help avoid detection; and thanks to those geo-targeting capabilities, was able to narrow the search for the most prime victims.

For instance, attackers tended to focus on users in countries with less stringent consumer protections for telecommunications users, including Egypt, Finland, India, Pakistan and Sweden, the researchers found. "Due to the nature of DCB, some countries might have been targeted with less success than others due to the consumer protections set in place by telcos," the report said.

Between the Gills

On the technical side, once the Android application is installed and launched, a first-stage URL is loaded into a webview, which is hosted on Cloudfront, researchers said. The malware then sends an initial GET request to that URL, which sends back a response containing links to JavaScript files hosted on Amazon Web Services cloud instances.

The application then fetches these resources, which it needs to proceed with the infection process — and specifically, to enable geo-targeting.

"One of the JavaScript files instructs the application to get a unique identifier for the device by making a POST request to the "live/keylookup" API endpoint and then constructing a final-stage URL," according to the analysis. "The baseurl variable is used to make a POST request that contains unique identifiers created by the application, to identify the device and the language and country details."

The response from that final-stage URL contains the configuration that the application will use to dictate its behavior, based on the victim's details. Based on this configuration, a mobile webpage displayed to the victim, asking them to submit their phone number to activate the app (and the DCB charges). This page is customized in terms of the language of the text, flag shown and country code.

Thanks to the steady revenue stream, Dark Herring is a well-funded operation. "The evidence also points to a significant financial investment from the malicious actors in building and maintaining the infrastructure to keep this global scam operating at such a high pace," the report said.

Given its Dark Herring's clear achievements, Zimperium said that it seems unlikely this will be the last the cybersecurity community hears from this cybercrime group.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Prophet Spider in Log4Shell attacks
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/01/initial-access-broker-involved-in.html
GIST	<p>An initial access broker group tracked as Prophet Spider has been linked to a set of malicious activities that exploits the Log4Shell vulnerability in unpatched VMware Horizon Servers.</p> <p>According to new research published by BlackBerry Research & Intelligence and Incident Response (IR) teams today, the cybercrime actor has been opportunistically weaponizing the shortcoming to download a second-stage payload onto the victimized systems.</p> <p>The payloads observed include cryptocurrency miners, Cobalt Strike Beacons, and web shells, corroborating a previous advisory from the U.K. National Health Service (NHS) that sounded the alarm on active exploitation of the vulnerabilities in VMware Horizon servers to drop malicious web shells and establish persistence on affected networks for follow-on attacks.</p> <p>Log4Shell is a moniker used to refer to an exploit affecting the popular Apache Log4j library that results in remote code execution by logging a specially crafted string. Since public disclosure of the flaw last month, threat actors have been quick to operationalize this new attack vector for a variety of intrusion campaigns to gain full control of affected servers.</p>

BlackBerry said it observed instances of exploitation mirroring tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) previously attributed to the Prophet Spider eCrime cartel, including the use of "C:\Windows\Temp\7fde\" folder path to store malicious files and "wget.bin" executable to fetch additional binaries as well as overlaps in infrastructure used by the group.

"Prophet Spider primarily gains access to victims by compromising vulnerable web servers, and uses a variety of low-prevalence tools to achieve operational objectives," CrowdStrike [noted](#) in August 2021, when the group was spotted actively exploiting flaws in Oracle WebLogic servers to gain initial access to target environments.

Like with many other initial access brokers, the footholds are sold to the highest bidder on underground forums located in the dark web, who then exploit the access for ransomware deployment. Prophet Spider is known to be active since at least May 2017.

This is far from the first time internet-facing systems running VMware Horizon have come under attack using Log4Shell exploits. Earlier this month, Microsoft called out a China-based operator tracked as [DEV-0401](#) for deploying a new ransomware strain called NightSky on the compromised servers.

The onslaught against Horizon servers has also prompted VMware to urge its customers to [apply the patches](#) immediately. "The ramifications of this vulnerability are serious for any system, especially ones that accept traffic from the open Internet," the virtualization services provider [cautioned](#).

"When an access broker group takes interest in a vulnerability whose scope is so unknown, it's a good indication that attackers see significant value in its exploitation," Tony Lee, vice president of global services technical operations at BlackBerry, said.

"It's likely that we will continue to see criminal groups exploring the opportunities of the Log4Shell vulnerability, so it's an attack vector against which defenders need to exercise constant vigilance," Lee added.

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HEADLINE	01/26 New evasive technique delivers AsyncRAT
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/01/hackers-using-new-evasive-technique-to.html
GIST	<p>A new, sophisticated phishing attack has been observed delivering the AsyncRAT trojan as part of a malware campaign that's believed to have commenced in September 2021.</p> <p>"Through a simple email phishing tactic with an html attachment, threat attackers are delivering AsyncRAT (a remote access trojan) designed to remotely monitor and control its infected computers through a secure, encrypted connection," Michael Dereviashkin, security researcher at enterprise breach prevention firm Morphisec, said in a report.</p> <p>The intrusions commence with an email message containing an HTML attachment that's disguised as an order confirmation receipt (e.g., Receipt-<digits>.html). Opening the decoy file redirects the message recipient to a web page prompting the user to save an ISO file.</p> <p>But unlike other attacks that route the victim to a phishing domain set up explicitly for downloading the next-stage malware, the latest RAT campaign cleverly uses JavaScript to locally create the ISO file from a Base64-encoded string and mimic the download process.</p> <p>"The ISO download is not generated from a remote server but from within the victim's browser by a JavaScript code that's embedded inside the HTML receipt file," Dereviashkin explained.</p>

	<p>When the victim opens the ISO file, it is automatically mounted as a DVD Drive on the Windows host and includes either a .BAT or a .VBS file, which continues the infection chain to retrieve a next-stage component via a PowerShell command execution.</p> <p>This results in the execution of a .NET module in-memory that subsequently acts as a dropper for three files — one acting as a trigger for the next — to finally deliver AsyncRAT as the final payload, while also checking for antivirus software and setting up Windows Defender exclusions.</p> <p>RATs such as AsyncRAT are typically used to forge a remote link between a threat actor and a victim device, steal information, and conduct surveillance through microphones and cameras. They provide an array of advanced capabilities that give the attackers the ability to fully monitor and control the compromised machines.</p> <p>Morphisec also pointed out the campaign's advanced tactics, which it said allowed the malware to slip through virtually undetected by most antimalware engines despite the operation being in effect for close to five months.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Laundered: \$9B in cryptocurrency 2021
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/nearly-9bn-laundered-cryptocurrency/
GIST	<p>Threat actors laundered \$8.6bn in cryptocurrency last year, although the real figure could be much higher when “non-crypto” crimes are included, according to Chainalysis.</p> <p>The firm provides analysis and investigation software to help shine a light on the murky world of blockchains and decentralized finance (DeFi).</p> <p>Findings from an upcoming report released yesterday revealed a 30% year-on-year increase in the value associated with money laundering activity via cryptocurrency in 2021.</p> <p>However, that’s not the whole story.</p> <p>“We also need to note that these numbers only account for funds derived from ‘cryptocurrency-native’ crime, meaning cyber-criminal activity such as darknet market sales or ransomware attacks in which profits are virtually always derived in cryptocurrency rather than fiat currency,” the firm explained.</p> <p>“It’s more difficult to measure how much fiat currency derived from offline crime – traditional drug trafficking, for example – is converted into cryptocurrency to be laundered. However, we know anecdotally this is happening.”</p> <p>Despite its reputation for being something of a Wild West, it’s easier to monitor money laundering efforts where cryptocurrency is involved because of the transparent nature of blockchains.</p> <p>To that end, DeFi protocols received the majority of illicit funds last year, the first since 2018 where centralized exchanges haven’t been the number one recipient, according to Chainalysis.</p> <p>That amounts to a 1,964% year-on-year increase in total value received by DeFi protocols from illicit addresses to a total of \$900m in 2021. North Korean hackers, who stole an estimated \$400m of cryptocurrency last year, were heavy users of DeFi, Chainalysis claimed.</p> <p>The good news is that money laundering is still concentrated on a small number of services, although slightly less so than in 2020.</p> <p>The analysis revealed that over half 55% of all cryptocurrency sent from illicit addresses went to only 270 service deposit addresses.</p>

	<p>Among these addresses were those associated with two exchanges sanctioned by the US Treasury last year: Suex and Chatex.</p> <p>“Law enforcement can strike a huge blow against cryptocurrency-based crime and significantly hamper criminals’ ability to access their digital assets by disrupting these services,” Chainalysis claimed.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 German govt. warns on Chinese APT27
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/german-govt-warns-of-apt27-hackers-backdooring-business-networks/
GIST	<p>The BfV German domestic intelligence services (short for Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz) warn of ongoing attacks coordinated by the APT27 Chinese-backed hacking group.</p> <p>This active campaign is targeting German commercial organizations, with the attackers using the HyperBro remote access trojans (RAT) to backdoor their networks.</p> <p>HyperBro helps the threat actors maintain persistence on the victims' networks by acting as an in-memory backdoor with remote administration capabilities.</p> <p>The agency said the threat group's goal is to steal sensitive information and may also attempt to target their victims' customers in supply chain attacks.</p> <p>"The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) has information about an ongoing cyber espionage campaign by the cyber attack group APT27 using the malware variant HYPERBRO against German commercial companies," the BfV said.</p> <p>"It cannot be ruled out that the actors, in addition to stealing business secrets and intellectual property, also try to infiltrate the networks of (corporate) customers or service providers (supply chain attack)."</p> <p>The BfV also published indicators of compromise (IOCs) and YARA rules to help targeted German organizations to check for HyperBro infections and connections to APT27 command-and-control (C2) servers.</p> <p>Breaching networks via Zoho and Exchange servers</p> <p>APT27 (also tracked as TG-3390, Emissary Panda, BRONZE UNION, Iron Tiger, and LuckyMouse) is a Chinese-sponsored threat group active since at least 2010 and known for its focus on information theft and cyberespionage campaigns.</p> <p>The German intelligence agency says APT27 has been exploiting flaws in Zoho AdSelf Service Plus software, an enterprise password management solution for Active Directory and cloud apps, since March 2021.</p> <p>This aligns with previous reports of Zoho ManageEngine installations being the target of multiple campaigns in 2021, coordinated by nation-state hackers using tactics and tooling similar to those employed by APT27.</p> <p>They first used an ADSelfService zero-day exploit until mid-September, then switched to an n-day AdSelfService exploit, and started exploiting a ServiceDesk bug beginning with October 25.</p> <p>In these attacks, they successfully compromised at least nine organizations from critical sectors worldwide, including defense, healthcare, energy, technology, and education, according to Palo Alto Networks researchers.</p> <p>In light of these campaigns, the FBI and CISA issued joint advisories (1, 2) warning of APT actors exploiting ManageEngine flaws to drop web shells on the networks of breached critical infrastructure orgs.</p>

	<p>APT27 and other Chinese-backed hacking groups were also linked to attacks exploiting critical ProxyLogon bugs in early March 2021 that allowed them to take over and steal data from unpatched Microsoft Exchange servers worldwide.</p> <p>US and allies (the European Union, the United Kingdom, and NATO) officially blamed China in June for last year's widespread Microsoft Exchange hacking campaign.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 FluBot, TeaBot targets Android devices
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/new-flubot-and-teabot-campaigns-target-android-devices-worldwide/
GIST	<p>New FluBot and TeaBot malware distribution campaigns have been spotted, using typical smishing lures or laced apps against Android users in Australia, Germany, Poland, Spain, and Romania.</p> <p>The SMS topics used for spreading the FluBot malware include fake courier messages, "Is this you in this video?" coaxes, phony browser updates, and fake voicemail notifications.</p> <p>The most recent FluBot campaign was tracked by researchers at Bitdefender Labs, who intercepted over 100,000 malicious SMS since December 2021, illustrating the threat actor's massive volume of distribution.</p> <p>According to the report, the FluBot operators conduct attacks in short-term waves using different lures for each country.</p> <p>Upon infecting one device, the malware uses the victim's contact list to distribute other SMS lures, achieving better infection rates due to recipients' trust in known contacts and continuous growth.</p> <p>FluBot distribution has remained active throughout 2021, and the reports about high-volume 2022 activity prove that its operators aren't ready to call it a day yet.</p> <p>TeaBot on the rise in the Google Play Store</p> <p>TeaBot is a different Android banking trojan discovered in January 2021 and has a global reach.</p> <p>As reported by Bitdefender, TeaBot has made multiple appearances on the Play Store since December 2021.</p> <p>According to the researchers, TeaBot is distributed to unsuspecting victims via trojanized apps on the Google Play Store, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QR Code Reader – Scanner App – 100,000 downloads • QR Scanner APK – 10,000 downloads • QR Code Scan – 10,000 downloads • Smart Cleaner – 1,000 downloads • Weather Cast – 10,000 downloads • Weather Daily – 10,000 downloads <p>None of these applications featured malicious functionality, and all offered the promised features, which allowed them to pass the Google Play Store's review process and reach a wider infection pool.</p> <p>Moreover, the actors actively promoted these apps by paying to appear in Google Ads served within other applications and games.</p> <p>However, once installed and executed on the victim's device, the apps started a background service that checked the country code and stopped if the result was Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Uruguay, or the United States.</p>

	<p>The app retrieved its configuration for all other victims and fetched an APK from a GitHub repository, which contained a TeaBot variant. At the same time, the apps prompted the user to allow third-party sources to install packages.</p> <p>Between December 6, 2021, and January 17, 2022, Bitdefender analysts have counted 17 different versions of TeaBot infecting devices through the listed apps.</p> <p>The TeaBot campaign illustrates that even when installing software from the Google Play Store, it does not mean that you will always be safe.</p> <p>Therefore, it is advisable to remain vigilant with new installations, check user reviews, monitor the app's network and battery usage, and only grant non-risky permissions.</p> <p>Remember, this is not the first time that TeaBot has managed to infiltrate the Play Store through laced apps, and it's unlikely it'll be the last one.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 VPNLab.net shuttered in global takedown
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/vpnlab-shuttered-in-latest-spate-of-global-takedowns
GIST	<p>The European Union's law enforcement agency, Europol, worked with investigators in 10 nations, including the United States and Canada, to take down a virtual private network (VPN) service allegedly used by cybercriminals to hide the origin of their intrusion attempts, the group said on Jan. 20.</p> <p>Law enforcement agencies from a group of 10 nations — Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Latvia, Ukraine, the United States, and the United Kingdom — worked with Europol to seize or disrupt 15 servers hosting the VPNLab.net VPN service. Starting in 2008, the service had offered encrypted communications to cybercriminals for as little as \$60 a year, preventing law enforcement from tracking the source of attacks, Europol officials said in a statement. By analyzing the servers, authorities found that attacks were in progress against more than 100 businesses.</p> <p>The takedown aims to cut off the number of ways that cybercriminals can hide their actions, Edvardas Šileris, the head of Europol's European Cybercrime Centre, said in the statement.</p> <p>"The actions carried out under this investigation make clear that criminals are running out of ways to hide their tracks online," he said. "Each investigation we undertake informs the next, and the information gained on potential victims means we may have pre-empted several serious cyberattacks and data breaches."</p> <p>The takedown is the latest law enforcement action against cybercriminals who have generally been able to avoid consequences for their actions. Earlier this week, Nigerian police and Interpol arrested nearly a dozen people in connection with a business e-mail compromise (BEC) fraud that had targeted tens of thousands of businesses worldwide. And, on Jan. 14, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) stated that it had detained or arrested 14 members of the REvil ransomware group and searched more than two dozen locations, seizing \$6.8 million in cryptocurrency and various other currencies as well as a score of premium vehicles.</p> <p>Law enforcement targeted VPNLab.net after cybercriminals started using the service to distribute malware, communicate during ransomware extortion campaigns, and for other illegal activities, Europol said in its statement. Europol helped bring the various nations' law enforcement agencies together under an analysis project, dubbed "CYBORG," involving 60 coordination meetings and three in-person workshops.</p> <p>The in-depth collaboration is a positive sign, Neil Jones, a cybersecurity evangelist for content-security firm Egnyte, said in a statement sent to Dark Reading. "It is a breath of fresh air to see that international law enforcement is focusing their efforts on technology providers that offer cyber-attack-friendly</p>

environments and make it easy for ransomware-as-a-service (RaaS) providers to perpetrate potential attacks," he said. "In this particular case, dozens of companies may have thwarted cyberattacks."

While the takedown of the alleged VPN service for cybercriminals is important, the service can easily be replaced without too much technical know-how, says Karl Sigler, senior security research manager at Trustwave SpiderLabs.

"Open VPN based services are certainly used by cybercriminals and are almost a dime a dozen," he says. "It seems like VPNLab was advertising its service specifically for cybercriminal use, especially with features like 'Double VPN.' However, Tor alone is often enough for criminals and can be layered with any VPN service to obtain that 'dual protection.'"

Cybercriminals often use Tor to anonymize their traffic, but recent reports that some threat actors run their own Tor nodes has led some cybercriminals to worry that large cyber operators — possibly nation-states — [are polluting Tor to de-anonymize its users](#).

Other attackers lease networks of proxy servers, often made up of compromised servers or Internet of Things devices, to hide the origin and content of their traffic.

"The alarming progression in hacking has been the specialization and federation of duties of the hacking groups," Garret Grajek, CEO of cloud-based identity services firm YouAttest, said in a statement. "The specialization of duties aids in the ability of the overall attack and increases the likelihood of success, which is why enterprises need to double down on key concepts of security like zero trust and real-time identity governance."

Companies will have to wait and see if law enforcement agencies' efforts have a [sustainable impact on cybercriminals](#) and their tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), Sigler says.

"I think that international cooperation is getting better, [and] I think it's essential for curbing cybercriminal activity, which typically respects no borders," he says. "It's a constant 'cat and mouse' game, though, so whether law enforcement cooperation can keep up with the new TTPs criminals adopt will be a critical component to whether this becomes a sustained law enforcement action or a game of 'whack-a-mole.'"

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HEADLINE	01/26 'BotenaGo' targets routers, IoT devices
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/vulnerabilities-threats/source-code-for-malware-targeting-millions-of-routers-iot-devices-uploaded-to-github
GIST	<p>The authors of a dangerous malware sample targeting millions of routers and Internet of Things (IoT) devices have uploaded its source code to GitHub, meaning other criminals can now quickly spin up new variants of the tool or use it as is, in their own attack campaigns.</p> <p>Researchers at AT&T Alien Labs first spotted the malware last November and named it "BotenaGo." The malware is written in Go — a programming language that has become quite popular among malware authors. It comes packed with exploits for more than 30 different vulnerabilities in products from multiple vendors, including Linksys, D-Link, Netgear, and ZTE.</p> <p>BotenaGo is designed to execute remote shell commands on systems where it has successfully exploited a vulnerability. An analysis that Alien Labs conducted last year when it first spotted the malware showed BotenaGo using two different methods to receive commands for targeting victims. One of them involved two backdoor ports for listening to and receiving the IP addresses of target devices, and the other involved setting a listener to system I/O user input and receiving target information through it.</p> <p>Researchers at Alien Labs discovered that while the malware is designed to receive commands from a remote server, it does not have any active command-and-control communication. This led the security vendor to surmise at the time that BotenaGo was part of a broader malware suite and likely one of multiple</p>

tools in an infection chain. The security vendor also found that BotenaGo's payload links were similar to the ones used by the operators of the infamous Mirai botnet malware. This led Alien Labs to theorize that BotenaGo was a new tool that the operators of Mirai are using to target specific machines that are known to them.

IoT Devices and Routers Hit

For reasons that are unclear, the unknown author of the malware recently made BotenaGo's source code publicly available through GitHub. The move could potentially result in a significant increase in BotenaGo variants as other malware authors use and adapt the source code for their specific purposes and attack campaigns, Alien Labs said in a [blog](#) this week. The company said it has observed new samples of BotenaGo surface and in use to spread Mirai botnet malware on IoT devices and routers. One of BotenaGo's payload servers is also in the list of indicators of compromise for the recently discovered Log4j vulnerabilities.

The BotenaGo malware consists of just 2,891 lines of code, making it a potentially good starting point for several new variants. The fact that it comes packed with exploits for more than 30 vulnerabilities in multiple routers and IoT devices is another factor that malware authors are likely to consider appealing. The many vulnerabilities that BotenaGo can exploit include CVE-2015-2051 in certain D-Link wireless routers, CVE-2016-1555 impacting Netgear products, CVE-2013-3307 on Linksys devices, and CVE-2014-2321 that impacts certain ZTE cable modem models.

"Alien Labs expects to see new campaigns based on BotenaGo variants targeting routers and IoT devices globally," said Alien Labs malware researcher Ofer Caspi, in the previously mentioned blog post. "As of the publishing of this article, antivirus (AV) vendor detection for BotenaGo and its variants remains behind with very low detection coverage from most of AV vendors."

According to Alien Labs, just three out of 60 AV on VirusTotal are currently capable of detecting the malware.

The company compared the move to the one Mirai's authors made back in 2016, when they uploaded the source code for the malware to a hacking community forum. The code release resulted in the development of numerous Mirai variants, such as [Satori](#), Moobot, and Masuta, that have accounted for millions of IoT device infections. The Mirai code release resulted in variants with unique functionality, new capabilities, and new exploits.

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HEADLINE	01/25 Medical devices: 53% w/known critical flaws
SOURCE	https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/01/25/critical-medical-device-risks/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>After a year of unprecedented ransomware attacks on hospitals and healthcare systems – and with healthcare now the #1 target for cybercriminals – critical medical device risks in hospital environments continue to leave hospitals and their patients vulnerable to cyber attacks and data security issues.</p> <p>Cynerio found that security threats related to IoT and related devices within healthcare environments have remained sorely under-addressed, despite increased investments in healthcare cybersecurity. Data shows that 53% of connected medical devices and other IoT devices in hospitals have a known critical vulnerability.</p> <p>Additionally, a third of bedside healthcare IoT devices – which patients most depend on for optimal health outcomes – have an identified critical risk. If attacked, these vulnerabilities could impact service availability, data confidentiality, or patient safety – with potentially life-threatening consequences for patient care.</p> <p>Critical medical device risks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• IV pumps are the most common healthcare IoT device and possess a lion's share of risk: IV pumps make up 38% of a hospital's typical healthcare IoT footprint and 73% of those have a

	<p>vulnerability that could jeopardize patient safety, data confidentiality, or service availability if it were to be exploited by an adversary.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthcare IoT running outdated Windows versions dominate devices in critical care sectors: Devices running versions older than Windows 10 account for the majority of devices used by pharmacology, oncology, and laboratory devices, and make up a plurality of devices used by radiology, neurology, and surgery departments, leaving patients connected to these devices vulnerable. • Default passwords remain a common risk: The most common IoMT and IoT device risks are connected to default passwords and settings that attackers can often obtain easily from manuals posted online, with 21% of devices secured by weak or default credentials. • Network segmentation can reduce critical IoMT and IoT risk: Network segmentation can address over 90 percent of the critical risks presented by connected medical devices in hospitals and is the most effective way to mitigate most risks presented by connected devices. <p>“Healthcare is a top target for cyber attacks, and even with continued investments in cybersecurity, critical vulnerabilities remain in many of the medical devices hospitals rely on for patient care,” said Daniel Brodie, CTO, Cynerio.</p> <p>“Visibility and risk identification are no longer enough. Hospitals and health systems don’t need more data – they need advanced solutions that mitigate risks and empower them to fight back against cyber attacks, and as medical device security providers it’s time for all of us to step up. With the first ransomware-related fatalities reported last year, it could mean life or death.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Chaes banking Trojan hijacks Chrome
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/chaes-banking-trojan-hijacks-chrome-with-malicious-extensions/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>A large-scale campaign involving over 800 compromised WordPress websites is spreading banking trojans that target the credentials of Brazilian e-banking users.</p> <p>The trojan used in this campaign is called 'Chaes,' and according to researchers from Avast, its been actively spreading since late 2021.</p> <p>Although the security firm notified the Brazilian CERT, the campaign is ongoing, with hundreds of websites still compromised with malicious scripts that push the malware.</p> <p>The attack chain</p> <p>When the victim visits one of the compromised websites, they are served with a pop-up that requests them to install a fake Java Runtime app.</p> <p>The MSI installer contains three malicious JavaScript files (install.js, sched.js, sucesso.js) that prepare the Python environment for the next stage loader.</p> <p>The sched.js script adds persistence by creating a Scheduled Task and a Startup link, and sucesso.js is responsible for reporting the status to the C2.</p> <p>The Python loader chain unfolds in memory and involves loading multiple scripts, shellcode, and Delphi DLLs until everything is in place for executing the final payload within a Python process.</p> <p>The final stage is undertaken by instructions.js, which fetches the Chrome extensions and installs them on the victim’s system. Finally, all extensions are launched with the proper arguments.</p> <p>Chrome extensions</p> <p>Avast says they have seen five different malicious Chrome browser extensions installed on victim's devices, including:</p>

- **Online** – Fingerprints the victim and writes a registry key.
- **Mtps4** – Connects to the C2 and waits for incoming PascalScripts. Also capable of capturing a screenshot and displaying it in full screen to hide malicious tasks running in the background.
- **Chrolog** – Steals passwords from Google Chrome by exfiltrating the database to the C2 through HTTP.
- **Chronodx** – A loader and JS banking trojan that runs silently in the background and waits for a Chrome launch. If the browser is opened, it will close it immediately and reopen its own instance of Chrome that makes banking info collection possible.
- **Chremows** – Targets Mercado Libre online marketplace credentials.

At this time, the Chaes campaign is still ongoing, and those who have been compromised will remain at risk even if the websites are cleaned.

Avast claims that some of the compromised websites abused for dropping the payloads are very popular in Brazil, so the number of infected systems is likely large.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Report forecast: 5 fraud threats for 2022
SOURCE	https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/01/26/fraud-threats-this-year/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Experian released its annual forecast, which reveals five fraud threats for the new year. With consumers continuing to take a digital-first approach to everything from shopping, dating and investing, fraudsters are finding new and innovative ways to commit fraud.</p> <p>Buy now, pay never The Buy Now, Pay Later (BNPL) space has grown massively recently. In fact, the number of BNPL users in the US has grown by more than 300 percent per year since 2018, reaching 45 million active users in 2021 who are spending more than \$20.8 billion. Without the right identity verification and fraud mitigation tools in place, fraudsters will take advantage of some BNPL companies and consumers in 2022. BNPL lenders will see an uptick in two types of fraud: identity theft and synthetic identity fraud, when a fraudster uses a combination of real and fake information to create an entirely new identity. This could result in significant losses for BNPL lenders.</p> <p>Beware of cryptocurrency scams Digital currencies, such as cryptocurrency, have become more conventional and scammers have caught on quickly. According to the FTC, investment cryptocurrency scam reports have skyrocketed, with nearly 7,000 people reporting losses totaling more than \$80 million from October 2020 to March 2021.</p> <p>In 2022, fraudsters will set up cryptocurrency accounts to extract, store and funnel stolen funds, such as the billions of stimulus dollars that were swindled by fraudsters.</p> <p>Double the trouble for ransomware attacks In the first six months of 2021, there was \$590 million in ransomware-related activity, which exceeds the value of \$416 million reported for the entirety of 2020 according to the U.S. Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network.</p> <p>Ransomware will be a significant fraud threat for companies in 2022 as fraudsters will look to not only ask for a hefty ransom to gain back control, but criminals will also steal data from the hacked company. This will not only result in companies losing sales because of the halt caused by the ransom attack, but it will also enable fraudsters to gain access and monetize stolen data such as employees' personal information, HR records and more – leaving the company's employees vulnerable to personal fraudulent attacks.</p> <p>Love, actually? Because more consumers went on dating apps and social media to look for love during the pandemic, fraudsters saw an opportunity to create intimate, trusted relationships without the immediate need to meet in-person.</p>

The FBI found that from January 1, 2021 — July 31, 2021, the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center received over 1,800 complaints, related to online romance scams, resulting in losses of approximately \$133 million. Romance scams will continue to see an uptick as fraudsters take advantage of these relationships to ask for money or a “loan” to cover anything from travel costs to medical expenses.

Digital elder abuse will rise

According to Experian’s latest Global Insights Report, there has been a 25 percent increase in online activity since the start of [COVID-19](#) as many, including the elderly, went online for everything from groceries to scheduling health care visits. This onslaught of digital newbies presents a new audience for fraudsters to attack.

Consumers will get hit hard by fraudsters through social engineering (when a fraudster manipulates a person to divulge confidential or private information) and account takeover fraud (when a fraudster steals a username and password from one site to takeover other accounts). This could result in billions of dollars of losses in 2022.

According to Juniper Research, merchant losses to online payment fraud will exceed \$206 billion cumulatively for the period between 2021 and 2025. That’s why it’s crucial that businesses get the right fraud prevention tools in place to anticipate future scams and mitigate financial losses.

“Business and consumers need to be aware of the creativity and agility that fraudsters are using today, especially in our digital-first world,” said [Kathleen Peters](#), chief innovation officer at [Experian](#) Decision Analytics in North America.

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HEADLINE	01/26 KONNI evolves into stealthier RAT
SOURCE	https://blog.malwarebytes.com/threat-intelligence/2022/01/konni-evolves-into-stealthier-rat/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>KONNI is a Remote Administration Tool that has being used for at least 8 years. The North Korean threat actor that is using this piece of malware has being identified under the Kimsuky umbrella. This group has been very busy, attacking political institutions located in Russia and South Korea. The last known attack where KONNI Rat was used was described here.</p> <p>We found that KONNI Rat is being actively developed, and new samples are now including significant updates. In this blog post, we will cover some of the major changes and explain why the security community should keep a close eye on it.</p> <p>Simplified Attack Chain</p> <p>The attack usually starts leveraging a malicious Office document. When this document is opened by the victim, a multistage attack is started, involving various steps. But these steps are just the way that the attackers manage to accomplish tasks to elevate privileges, evade detection and deploy required files.</p> <p>The attack usually starts leveraging a malicious Office document. When this document is opened by the victim, a multistage attack is started, involving various steps. But these steps are just the way that the attackers manage to accomplish tasks to elevate privileges, evade detection and deploy required files.</p> <p>The final goal of the attack is installing what is called KONNI Rat, which is a .dll file supported by an .ini file. In a nutshell, the .dll file contains the functionality of the RAT, and the .ini file contains the address of the first C&C server.</p> <p>As we have seen, KONNI Rat is far from being abandoned. The authors are constantly making code improvements. In our point of view, their efforts are aimed at breaking the typical flow recorded by sandboxes and making detection harder, especially via regular signatures as critical parts of the executable are now encrypted.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/16 MyShake quake warning app now available
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/myshake-earthquake-warning-app-now-available-in-wa/
GIST	<p>Every second matters before an earthquake strikes, and some Washington residents might get a few more now that a new earthquake-warning app is available.</p> <p>In Washington, there are already two warning systems in place, but the MyShake app provides a third and possibly quicker option, the state said. The app, first launched in 2019, sends alerts in California and Oregon. It became available in Washington on Wednesday.</p> <p>The MyShake app can be downloaded for free through the Apple or Google Play app stores.</p> <p>The app was created by seismologists and engineers in California and funded by the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services.</p> <p>"Accessing tools such as the MyShake app will help you, your family and community be better prepared and have a more positive outcome in the event of an earthquake," Christina Curry, the office's chief deputy director, said in a news release. "We are pleased to share this resource with our West Coast neighbors."</p> <p>Alerts based on information collected by the U.S. Geological Survey's ShakeAlert earthquake-warning system were previously available through the Wireless Emergency Alert, or WEA, system and on Android phones' built-in alerting system.</p> <p>MyShake and the built-in Android system send alerts for earthquakes that exceed magnitude 4.5, while the WEA system will do so for earthquakes above 5.0.</p> <p>The USGS system went active in California in late 2019, Oregon in March 2021 and Washington in May. The alert system saw a delayed rollout, however, because the federal agency left it up to states to implement the system locally.</p> <p>Now, the ShakeAlert warnings are available to more than 50 million people across the three states.</p> <p>WEA was built as a universal alert system meant for mobile devices new and old, according to Harold Tobin, director of the Pacific Northwest Seismic Network. This is why the system doesn't reach everyone uniformly, whereas MyShake and the built-in Android system have a lower alert threshold and rely on cellular service and Wi-Fi.</p> <p>"The main message is that redundancy is also good — 99.99% of the time nothing is happening, but when an earthquake happens you want the alert to actually get to you," Tobin said.</p> <p>The system relies on 1,150 seismometers placed along the West Coast that can pinpoint and relay the location of an earthquake.</p> <p>Some 394 seismic stations are scattered across Washington, about 230 of which contribute data to ShakeAlert, according to the University of Washington.</p> <p>Seismometers closest to the epicenter will detect the initial, faster P-waves and transmit that information before the slower, more destructive S-waves arrive.</p> <p>Living farther from the epicenter could make the alert slower. Living close to it could make it virtually meaningless.</p> <p>Residents in Seattle, Tacoma and other cities along Puget Sound could get up to a minute's warning should a shift in the Cascadia Subduction Zone cause a massive offshore quake.</p>

	<p>While many seismometers are concentrated along the coast, the best and fastest way to detected offshore quakes is through the installation of offshore, underwater seismometers.</p> <p>“There are just a couple of those now and they can’t really contribute fast enough to be part of a warning system,” Tobin said. “We would like to grow that tremendously in the future but that’s going to require new funding from the federal government.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Telegram as a ‘medium for radicalization’?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/germany-telegram-medium-radicalization-82491848
GIST	<p>BERLIN -- A top German security official said Wednesday that his agency has created a task force to investigate individuals suspected of using Telegram to commit crimes, amid growing concerns that the messaging app is becoming a “medium for radicalization.”</p> <p>Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office warned that the app is being used to target politicians, scientists and doctors for their role in tackling the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>“The coronavirus pandemic in particular has contributed to people becoming radicalized on Telegram, threatening others and even publishing calls to murder,” the agency's chief, Holger Muench, said in a statement.</p> <p>He said the task force would seek Telegram's cooperation but also take measures if it doesn't.</p> <p>The German government has tried for years, with little success, to get Telegram to abide by the country's rules on taking down illegal content.</p> <p>The company behind the app, which claims to have hundreds of millions of users worldwide, is based in the United Arab Emirates.</p> <p>Last month, German police carried out raids in Saxony after media reports that a group of people on Telegram had discussed plans to kill the state's governor, Michael Kretschmer, and other members of the state government. The group's members shared a rejection of vaccinations, the state and the government's coronavirus policies.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 EU court annuls Intel's 2009 antitrust fine
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/eu-court-annuls-intels-2009-billion-euro-antitrust-82481167
GIST	<p>LONDON -- Chipmaker Intel scored a decisive legal victory Wednesday in a long-running battle against European Union competition watchdogs after a court reversed itself and threw out a billion-euro antitrust fine issued more than a decade ago.</p> <p>The EU's General Court annulled the 1.06 billion euro fine (\$1.43 billion at current exchange rates) that competition regulators issued Intel in 2009 for allegedly using illegal sales tactics to shut out smaller rival AMD.</p> <p>It was the General Court's second decision on the case, after the bloc's top court ordered it to take another look at its earlier decision.</p> <p>The European Commission, the 27-nation bloc’s top antitrust enforcers, had fined Intel for allegedly abusing its dominant position in the global market for x86 microprocessors with a strategy to exclude rivals by using rebates.</p> <p>The General Court upheld the penalty in 2014 but three years later the EU’s Court of Justice ruled that the fine could be sent back for further legal review, citing a legal error.</p>

	<p>This time around, the General Court found that “the analysis carried out by the Commission is incomplete” and doesn’t legally establish that rebates Intel was giving to customers had anticompetitive effects, according to a summary of the ruling.</p> <p>The latest court decision can be appealed to the Court of Justice but only on points of law.</p> <p>Intel CEO Pat Gelsinger said on a quarterly call with investors Wednesday that the company is pleased with the court's ruling.</p> <p>“We will need to study in detail what we can learn from the ECJ from this judgment,” European Commission Vice President Margrethe Vestager said at a news briefing in Brussels.</p> <p>Vestager, who took over as EU competition commissioner in 2014, said she'll look at “what is the balance between the things that we won, and the things that we lost and the annulment of the fine. How to react to that — we will need a bit of time.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Puerto Rico Senate targeted in cyberattack
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/official-puerto-ricos-senate-targeted-cyberattack-82495236
GIST	<p>SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico -- Puerto Rico’s Senate announced Wednesday that it was the target of a cyberattack that disabled its internet provider, phone system and official online page, the latest in a string of similar incidents in recent years.</p> <p>Senate President José Luis Dalmau said in a statement that there is no evidence that hackers were able to access sensitive information belonging to employees, contractors or consultants, although the incident is still under investigation.</p> <p>He said the incident was reported to local and federal authorities.</p> <p>Puerto Rico has struggled with hackers in recent years. Last year, a private company that took over operations for the transmission and distribution of electricity in the U.S. territory reported a cyberattack on its website that prevented customers from accessing the site.</p> <p>In 2020, an online scam attempted to steal more than \$4 million from Puerto Rican government agencies, forcing authorities to freeze \$2.9 million. Later that year, hackers broke into the database of Puerto Rico’s fire department and demanded \$600,000 in an act of alleged extortion.</p>
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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	01/27 France probes 2nd suspicious blast at rally
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/france-looking-second-suspicious-blast-last-month-dakar-rally-saudi-rmc-radio-2022-01-27/
GIST	<p>PARIS, Jan 27 (Reuters) - French authorities are looking into what was potentially a second suspicious explosion at the Dakar sports car rally in Saudi Arabia last month, French radio station RMC reported on Thursday.</p> <p>According to RMC, a truck belonging to the team of Franco-Italian contender Camelia Liparoti caught fire on Dec.31 after the driver heard a "boom". A day earlier an explosion under a vehicle at the rally seriously injured French race driver Philippe Boutron.</p> <p>French anti-terrorism prosecutors opened a preliminary investigation into the first explosion earlier this month. Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian has said "there were hypotheses that it was a terrorist attack."</p>

However, Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry said on Jan. 8 that an initial investigation into the first blast had not raised any criminal suspicions.

[RMC](#) said France's DGSI secret service was also interested by what happened to Liparoti's truck.

On its website, RMC showed a video of the truck destroyed by fire, saying that its gas tank was found 50 metres (164 ft) away from the truck and had a hole in it.

The broadcaster said the driver heard an explosion and jumped out of the truck. No one was harmed.

France's anti-terrorism prosecutors declined to comment.

The French foreign ministry did not immediately reply to a request for comment on the RMC report. The French company which organised the rally, ASO, and the Saudi government also did not immediately respond.

On an Instagram post dated Jan.2, Liparoti showed a picture of the truck on fire.

"Yes, my pink truck caught fire in the night of 31st of December. Undetermined reasons. The driver got out intact, great news," Liparoti said.

"Suddenly, just before starting racing this Dakar, I lost everything. No clothes, no gear, no passport, no place to sleep or shower. Nothing left."

[Franceinfo](#) radio broadcaster said last week that discussions between Paris and Saudi Arabia over sending French investigators on the ground had been "very difficult".

The Dakar rally, now in its 44th edition, started in 1978 as a race from Paris to the Senegalese capital but moved from Africa to South America for safety reasons in 2009. It has been held entirely in Saudi Arabia since 2020.

In March this year, Jeddah's Corniche race circuit will host a round of the motorsports world's most prestigious competition, Formula One.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Burkina Faso coup impact USAF support?
SOURCE	https://www.airforcemag.com/burkina-faso-coup-may-halt-u-s-air-force-counter-terrorism-cooperation/
GIST	<p>AFRICAN AIR CHIEFS SYMPOSIUM, KIGALI, Rwanda—A military coup in the fragile West African country of Burkina Faso may prevent the U.S. Air Force from continuing vital counterterrorism surveillance and targeting efforts in an area where Islamic terrorism is growing, the Burkina Faso vice air chief told Air Force Magazine Jan. 26.</p> <p>Presidential vehicles were found littered with bullets and soldiers mutinied across the country Jan. 23 while President Roch Kaboré disappeared from public view. Instead, French-educated Army Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba declared he was in control and would end the reign of terror caused by Islamic militants. Burkina Faso citizens took to the streets in support of the military takeover, but a security expert tells Air Force Magazine that African military coups in the name of citizen security often create a vacuum that strengthens terrorist groups.</p> <p>"I can't even reach my chief of defense right now," Burkina Faso Deputy Air Chief Col. Victor Beloum told Air Force Magazine in a French-language interview on the sidelines of the African Air Chiefs Symposium in Kigali.</p> <p>Beloum said he left the capital Ouagadougou for the conference co-sponsored by U.S. Air Forces Africa just as the coup began to unfold.</p>

“I’ve been trying to reach out and make contact with folks back home and haven’t been able to get a clear answer on what’s happening,” he said. “Hopefully, the United States will be by our side to be able to set up re-elections as soon as possible.”

In recent days, it was learned that the military dissolved the government, national assembly, and suspended the constitution, detaining the president and several members of his government.

While the State Department has not yet made a determination that the military takeover is permanent, it has temporarily paused most assistance, a U.S. Department of State spokesperson told Air Force Magazine. The military leader so far seems unfazed, dismissing condemnation from the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which carries with it the threat of sanctions.

Beloum said the U.S. Air Force had been helping with training, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and targeting data that it shares with the Burkina Faso Air Force.

The State Department provides about \$65 million in security assistance, primarily for peacekeeping operations, and the Defense Department provides another \$30 million in counterterrorism assistance. When neighboring Mali suffered a coup in August 2020, the State Department cut off security assistance and military intelligence sharing halted. Both nations are part of the arid Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa.

The five weak states of the Sahel have vast territories and uncontrolled spaces where Islamic State group and al-Qaeda affiliated group JMIN are known to exist. The U.S. Air Force operates ISR platforms out of the Sahel nation Niger from Air Base 101 and Air Base 201, contributing intelligence to French ground forces who have killed terrorist leaders in recent years.

But the terrorist threat has spilled into Burkina Faso.

In June 2021, 100 people were killed in the northern village of Solhan, an attack blamed on terrorists who crossed the border from Mali. In November 2021, another attack killed 50 members of security forces, according to press reports.

The United States has long assisted the five nations making up the G-5 Sahel group, and supported France’s Operation Barkhane, which began in 2014. But even though France rescued Mali from a terrorist siege on its capital in 2013, the citizens of the region have balked at the continued presence of 5,500 French troops. French President Emmanuel Macron has promised to cut his presence in half, preparing to diminish resources containing the threat.

U.S. African Command has been the lead behind confronting the African terrorist threat, but has yet to comment on what will happen when the French depart. The command is still assessing developments in Burkina Faso.

“Along with regional partners, U.S. Africa Command conducts military operations to disrupt, degrade, and neutralize violent extremist organizations that present a transnational threat,” AFRICOM spokesperson Lt. Cmdr. Timothy S. Pietrack told Air Force Magazine in a statement.

“We are following the reports of a military takeover of the civilian government in Burkina Faso,” he added. “The situation is still developing and we do not have any additional information to provide at this time.”

U.S. Air Force ISR Help

Beloum is worried that if U.S. assistance is cut off, his nation of 21 million people will have even less of a capacity to track and target terrorists.

The Burkina Faso Air Force only has three Super Tucano light attack aircraft, but most are grounded.

“It could take up to one and a half to two years to get the spare parts from Brazil so that’s a big showstopper right now,” he said. “The aircraft are not operational, they’re grounded right now.”

An American ISR platform that operates out of Ouagadougou is feeding the military vital intelligence.

“The United States Air Force actually is collecting intelligence and sharing it directly with Burkina Faso because we are lacking this ability,” Beloum explained.

The vice air chief described advances it hoped to work towards with U.S. Air Force assistance, including thermographic FLIR cameras and a Cessna ISR program.

In Burkina Faso, he said the U.S. Air Force collects intelligence on specific target areas, then works in conjunction with Burkina Faso intelligence agencies to queue in the ISR platform on areas of interest.

“They continue to collaborate and that really helps the mission progress because we can actually help to queue the operation and then do the analysis afterwards,” he said.

Beloum described the militant groups in a manner different from international reporting, which focuses on their ideological motivations.

“You have these groups that conduct terrorist attacks to try to discredit or dismantle national authorities so that they can continue to carry out their trafficking whether it’s drugs, arms, weapons, and gold as well,” he said.

The vice air chief acknowledged that there are groups with a political motivation, but he said “banditry” was the bigger problem.

“They’re conducting terrorism to carry out basically illicit activities and organized crime,” he said.

West African Coups Strengthen Terrorist Groups

With four military coups taking place in West Africa in less than two years, National Defense University scholar Joseph Siegle said militaries in the region are beginning to believe overthrowing civilian government is the solution to discontent in the ranks.

“We have a more assertive military, an attitude among some military actors that they have the right to intervene in governance in Africa,” he said.

In the case of Burkina Faso, the third G-5 Sahel country to fall to military rule in two years, citizen security against terrorism was cited as a rationale. But Siegel says military takeovers do not lead to greater protection from terrorism.

“That’s not what’s happening, the security problem is getting worse there,” he said.

“It sort of ignores that their main motivation to take power is to get to the trappings of power,” he added. “It isn’t somehow there to improve the security environment, we aren’t seeing that on the ground. So, it’s a beguiling narrative.”

A State Department spokesperson said embassy officials are still in contact with President Kabore’s government.

“We acknowledge the tremendous stress on Burkinabé society and security forces posed by ISIS and JNIM, but urge military officers to step back, return to their barracks, and address their concerns through dialogue,” the spokesperson said in a statement provided to Air Force Magazine.

	<p>Meanwhile, Beloum is already looking ahead, hoping the military will restore civilian control and relations with the United States Air Force will be preserved.</p> <p>“I think the intention will be to hopefully maintain that partnership throughout this period as we try to quickly re-establish free elections ultimately to protect the civilians and make sure that that security is in place for the civilian populations,” he said. “I can’t really say for sure because like I said, I’m not in contact with my leadership.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Prison time cut for Oakland ISIS supporter
SOURCE	https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/east-bay/prison-time-reduced-for-oakland-man-sentenced-for-terrorism-charges/2791250/
GIST	<p>An East Bay man serving prison time for talking about wanting to kill some 10,000 Bay Area residents may get out of prison early.</p> <p>NBC Bay Area’s Investigative Unit has been following the case since 2017. That’s when Berkeley High School grad Amer Al-Haggagi was indicted on terrorism charges.</p> <p>Prosecutors said he was using social media to support ISIS.</p> <p>He pled guilty to the charges and in 2019, was sentenced to nearly 16 years in prison.</p> <p>But on Wednesday, the Ninth Circuit ruled the judge in Al-Haggagi’s case abused his discretion in applying a terrorism enhancement to the sentence.</p> <p>The Ninth Circuit reduced his sentence to 18 months.</p> <p>His lawyer said the court did the right thing.</p> <p>“What he did here was talk about campaigns of terror,” said attorney Mary McNamara. “They are atrocious things he actually said, but he didn’t carry out any of them.”</p> <p>The ruling means Al-Haggagi could be released by this summer.</p> <p>In a court document, federal prosecutors told the court the right decision was handed down in 2019 and believe Al-Haggagi should stay behind bars to “protect the public from further crimes.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/27 UK drops terror case against teenager
SOURCE	https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/uk-news/2022/01/27/uk-drops-terror-case-against-teenager-over-trafficking-fears/
GIST	<p>An investigation against the youngest girl in the UK to be charged with terrorism offences has been dropped over fears she was a victim of trafficking.</p> <p>The 16-year-old, who cannot be named for legal reasons, was accused of possessing manuals for making firearms and bombs.</p> <p>She was arrested in October 2020 in the Derbyshire area of northern England and accused of holding extreme right-wing beliefs.</p> <p>But, for the first time, British investigators have halted the case after experts ruled she may have been groomed by a US extremist online.</p>

She was due to stand trial in August charged with six terror offences but the case was postponed to allow further investigations to take place after her legal team referred her to the nation's body for investigating [trafficking and slavery](#).

It has led to the Home Office's Single Competent Authority to conclude there were "conclusive grounds" she had been groomed by a male extremist in the US.

The case has now been discontinued by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) on the grounds there is no realistic prospect of conviction.

Prosecutors had alleged the girl possessed a bomb-making video and a guide for making 3D-printed firearms.

Last week a 14-year-old boy became the youngest person in the UK to be convicted of terror offences.

Latest data has revealed [13% of those arrested for terrorism offences in the UK were aged under 18](#). Jonathan Hall QC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, told the *BBC* that this case has wider implications.

"The internet is not only pulling more and more young people into criminal liability for terrorist offending, but may yield defences to criminal liability, or powerful public interest reasons why a child should not be prosecuted," he said.

"Issues of fault, dangerousness and criminal liability are still being worked out when dealing with online terrorism offending by children. This case has a wider implication.

"If criminal justice is not the right outcome, this begs the question whether there are adequate measures to deal with any abiding risk the child may present."

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HEADLINE	01/26 Everett port Coast Guard unit returns
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/maritime-security/coast-guard-members-of-everett-port-security-unit-returning-home-following-nine-month-deployment/
GIST	<p>Members of U.S. Coast Guard Port Security Unit 313 were scheduled to return home to Everett, Washington, Thursday following a nine-month deployment as the Maritime Security Detachment, Joint Task Force Guantanamo, Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.</p> <p>During the deployment, PSU 313 operations focused on seaward security and provided around-the-clock waterside and shore side anti-terrorism and force protection defense security to Department of Defense assets and personnel at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay.</p> <p>PSU 313's operations also consisted of escorting marine traffic in and out of port as well as enforcing the naval defense sea area security zone around the base. Unit personnel worked closely with service members from Joint Task Force, Naval Station Guantanamo Bay Harbor Patrol Unit, Marine Corps Security Forces Company, and Air Force and Army personnel conducting interagency operations and training at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay and along adjoining waters.</p> <p>As both a federal law enforcement agency and an armed force, the U.S. Coast Guard is uniquely positioned to conduct defense operations in support of combatant commanders on all seven continents. The service routinely provides forces in joint military operations worldwide, including the deployment of cutters, boats, aircraft, and deployable specialized forces.</p> <p>Commissioned in 1998, PSU 313 is one of eight U.S. Coast Guard port security units located across the United States. PSUs are Coast Guard Reserve-staffed units and deployable specialized forces assigned to the commander of Coast Guard Pacific Area. PSUs are capable of providing the Coast Guard, Department</p>

	<p>of Homeland Security, Department of Defense, and interagency operational and tactical commanders with equipped, trained, and organized expeditionary forces who are ready to deploy anywhere in the world on short notice to execute anti-terrorism and force protection operations within ports, harbors, littoral waters, or in the point defense of high value assets.</p> <p>PSU 313's previous overseas deployments include Korea (2000, 2007, 2013); Kuwait (2003, 2010); Haiti (2010); and Guantanamo Bay (2007, 2015). The unit also defended Naval Magazine Indian Island, Washington, in the months after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 UN: Taliban must respect women rights
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/26/taliban-must-respect-rights-of-women-and-children-says-un-head
GIST	<p>The Taliban must uphold the fundamental human rights of women and children, the United Nations chief has said, as he urged the international community to release frozen Afghan aid to prevent families from selling their babies to buy food.</p> <p>The secretary general, António Guterres, also warned that “Afghanistan is hanging by a thread” as millions of impoverished citizens struggle to survive amid deteriorating humanitarian conditions.</p> <p>“We urge the Taliban to seize this moment and garner international trust and goodwill by recognising – and upholding – the basic human rights that belong to every girl and woman,” Guterres told a UN security council meeting.</p> <p>He expressed concern about recent reports of arbitrary arrests and abductions of female activists, saying: “I strongly appeal for their release.”</p> <p>At the same time, he added, “I appeal to the international community to step up support for the people of Afghanistan”, including by releasing aid funds in Washington that remain frozen by the World Bank and the US government.</p> <p>Over half of all Afghans face “extreme levels of hunger”, Guterres told the council, and “some families are selling their babies to purchase food”.</p> <p>China’s UN ambassador, Zhang Jun, mentioned the case of one woman who “sold her two daughters and a kidney” to feed her family.</p> <p>“This is a human tragedy,” he said, implicitly urging Washington to lift “unilateral sanctions” and ease the freeze on Afghan assets.</p> <p>The United Nations continues to call for “a relaxation of those sanctions” that squeeze the economy and prevent the full delivery of essential services, UN envoy to Afghanistan Deborah Lyons told the council via video link.</p> <p>Guterres said international aid agencies and donors “need to jump-start Afghanistan’s economy through increased liquidity”, including \$1.2bn from a World Bank-managed fund for Afghanistan’s reconstruction that has been frozen since the fundamentalist Taliban took over last August when US forces exited.</p> <p>“Without action, lives will be lost, and despair and extremism will grow,” he said.</p> <p>Taliban officials recently held talks with western powers in Oslo to address the humanitarian crisis, with western diplomats linking humanitarian aid to Afghanistan to an improvement in human rights.</p>

	<p>Led by the Norwegian prime minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, whose country currently chairs the security council, Wednesday's session of the 15-member body sought to clarify the mandate of the UN political mission in Afghanistan.</p> <p>The mandate expires on 17 March and must be reviewed to account for the Taliban's return to power.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Stranded Afghans decry UK animal rescues
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/26/its-a-joke-left-behind-afghans-despair-at-dog-rescue-revelations
GIST	<p>Afghans who worked for the British but were not able to get on flights out of Kabul said the revelation that Boris Johnson appears to have personally approved the evacuation of animals last August added to their pain and despair.</p> <p>“People have died in Afghanistan, because of their connections to the UK, but the prime minister was just allowing animals to get out of there,” said Asif*, a senior adviser to British aid projects for several years. “It is like a joke. I see now that animals have a higher value than us.”</p> <p>His pregnant wife was shot by Taliban gunmen who raided their home in autumn 2021. She died in hospital days later from her injuries.</p> <p>Despite years of service, and support from his former employer, he was told he was ineligible for refuge in the UK because he was a contractor rather than a direct employee.</p> <p>He has fled Afghanistan and is now living in a mosque in a neighbouring country, but the Taliban threatened his brother, demanding that he reveal where Asif was hiding.</p> <p>“We are human beings living here like animals, while they are rescuing animals from Afghanistan. It’s very painful,” Asif said.</p> <p>Abdullah*, a British embassy security guard who worked for GardaWorld in a management role, said he remembered waiting at the airport gate beside vans full of dogs.</p> <p>“They got clearance, and we didn’t. We were there at the same day, waiting at the same gate,” he said. “We’ve talked about it a lot – all the guards were very angry – they gave priority to dogs over guards who had spent years serving the British government. Our buses were full of women and children – none of us got through. It was such a bad day for us.”</p> <p>About 180 colleagues had been told they would make one of the last evacuation flights, but their departure was halted when Islamic State bombed an airport entrance.</p> <p>The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) made a clear commitment that all GardaWorld staff would be allowed to travel to the UK, but this has not happened.</p> <p>“We’re still here waiting. Since the embassy closed, we don’t have jobs, we don’t have money to buy food. It’s been minus 15 in Kabul, and some of us don’t have money to buy a kilo of wood to heat our homes,” Abdullah said.</p> <p>“We’ve been told that GardaWorld staff will be eligible for evacuation under a new scheme, but we’re still waiting. We really hope that the British government will prioritise us now.”</p> <p>Asif and Abdullah’s stories formed part of the Guardian’s Afghanistan: the left behind project.</p> <p>The series featured the stories of those who were trapped, in Afghanistan or in limbo as they searched for safe haven, fearing for their lives from Taliban attacks or through hunger because they could not work.</p>

	<i>*Names have been changed to protect anonymity</i>
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HEADLINE	01/26 US-backed forces retake Syria prison
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-troops-join-fight-to-dislodge-islamic-state-from-syrian-prison-11643196503?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>U.S.-backed Syrian forces said they retook full control of a prison on Wednesday after a weeklong battle with Islamic State fighters who attacked the facility in their worst assault in the country in nearly three years.</p> <p>As many as 200 U.S. soldiers joined the fight alongside Kurdish-led forces at the prison in the city of Hasakah, U.S. defense officials said, in the most serious test in years for the country's small American military contingent. More than 100 people were killed in the fighting, most of them Islamic State members, according to the Syrian Democratic Forces, which oversees northeastern Syria with U.S. backing.</p> <p>An SDF spokesman said Wednesday that al-Sina'a prison was under its entire control, with all Islamic State members having surrendered.</p> <p>For Islamic State, the attack on the prison was a reassertion of the group's ability to carry out large-scale violence and threaten a high-value facility held by U.S.-backed forces. The complex attack, involving sleeper cells and an uprising among prisoners inside the facility, was more ambitious than any attempted in Syria since 2019.</p> <p>The prison break illustrated the challenges of eradicating Islamic State, an organization that has shown an ability to repeatedly transform itself to adapt to shifting political currents and security conditions in Iraq and Syria.</p> <p>The group has its origins in the homegrown insurgency against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and later became a transnational extremist group and eventually a self-proclaimed state ruling over millions of people in Iraq and Syria.</p> <p>Though it was ultimately crushed, the prison break could be a significant propaganda victory in Islamic State's efforts to continue to inspire its world-wide following, analysts said.</p> <p>"The symbolic impact of this in the grand scheme of what ISIS is trying to do, means that this is going to go down as a pivotal moment in its history in Syria and globally as well," said Charlie Winter, director of research at ExTrac, a conflict-analysis firm.</p> <p>The attack began nearly a week ago with suicide bombings and a revolt among Islamic State members inside the prison. That sparked days of fighting that spilled into the neighborhoods surrounding the facility.</p> <p>As the operation to retake the facility culminated on Wednesday, the SDF said it carried out a building-by-building sweep of the prison grounds in an attempt to regain full control of the facility.</p> <p>The SDF said earlier on Wednesday that 1,000 Islamic State fighters had surrendered during the fighting. Islamic State claimed to have freed 800 people from the prison but the SDF denied that assertion. Some 200 people were involved in the initial attack on the prison, which involved a revolt inside the facility, the SDF has also said.</p> <p>The intense fighting resulted in the biggest U.S. combat deployment in Syria in years. U.S. officials said 100 to 200 U.S. troops were part of a response that also included airstrikes, surveillance and Bradley Fighting Vehicles, the heaviest vehicle at the disposal of the U.S. forces in Syria.</p>

American soldiers used the Bradleys to create specific pathways within Hasakah, and fired on those pathways, defense officials said. The deployed troops are a significant part of the roughly 900 U.S. soldiers who are stationed in Syria [supporting Kurdish-led Syrian militias](#) in their fight to eradicate Islamic State.

The U.S. didn't participate in negotiations with Islamic State members inside the prison, but had advisers with the SDF forces leading those talks, U.S. officials said.

"The anti-Daesh fight continues & we are #StrongerTogether," the U.S.-led military coalition in Iraq and Syria, tweeted Wednesday.

The SDF said just after midnight Wednesday that over the last two days it had freed 23 people who had been taken hostage by Islamic State, including prison staff and others.

As the battle wore on, concern is growing for the fate of the 850 children as young as 12 held in the prison and trapped with Islamic State fighters who were still in control of a section of the facility. Many of the children are boys who were detained in 2019 after the fall of Islamic State's last territorial enclave in Syria, according to the charity Save the Children.

The SDF accused Islamic State on Wednesday of using the boys and teenagers as human shields. It wasn't immediately clear what happened to the children.

The U.N. children's agency Unicef said late Tuesday that it was concerned about reports that children trapped in the prison may have been forced to participate in the fighting between prisoners and security forces and reports that some had been killed.

"These children should never have been held in military detention in the first place. The violence they are subjected to may amount to war crimes," said Unicef Executive Director Henrietta Fore.

Some 45,000 people have been forced to flee their homes in the neighborhoods around the prison, according to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The attack came after a lull in Islamic State violence in Syria. In the desert expanse in the center of the country, which has been the focus of the group's insurgency in recent years, the group carried out only 11 attacks and killed fewer government soldiers than it had at any time since 2019, according to Gregory Waters, an analyst with the Counter Extremism Project who tracks Islamic State activity in the area.

Immediately following the prison break, Islamic State launched a series of other attacks within areas held by the SDF in northeastern Syria, suggesting a coordinated campaign, analysts said. The Jan. 20 prison break coincided with another attack in which [Islamic State gunmen killed 11 Iraqi soldiers](#) as they slept in their camp.

"ISIS has shifted its operational focus from quantity to quality," said Mr. Winter, the conflict analyst.

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HEADLINE	01/26 UN chief: Afghanistan 'hanging by thread'
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-chief-tells-security-council-afghanistan-hanging-by-thread-2022-01-26/
GIST	UNITED NATIONS, Jan 26 (Reuters) - Afghanistan is "hanging by a thread," with millions suffering extreme hunger, education and social services on the brink of collapse and a lack of liquidity limiting the capacity to reach people in need, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the Security Council on Wednesday.

"We need to suspend the rules and conditions that constrict not only Afghanistan's economy, but our lifesaving operations. At this moment of maximum need, these rules must be seriously reviewed," Guterres told the 15-member council.

He again called for countries to issue general licenses covering transactions necessary to all humanitarian activities.

"We need to give financial institutions and commercial partners legal assurance that they can work with humanitarian operators without fear of breaching sanctions," Guterres said.

Some \$9.5 billion in Afghan central bank reserves remain blocked outside the country and international support given to the previous government has dried up since the Taliban seized power last August.

"We need to jump-start Afghanistan's economy through increased liquidity. We must pull the economy back from the brink. This means finding ways to free up frozen currency reserves and re-engage Afghanistan's Central Bank," Guterres said.

In December, donors to a frozen World Bank-administered Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund agreed to transfer \$280 million to the World Food Program (WFP) and U.N. children's agency UNICEF to support nutrition and health in Afghanistan.

"We need the remaining \$1.2 billion to be freed up urgently, to help Afghanistan's people survive the winter," Guterres said. "Time is of the essence."

The United Nations earlier this month appealed for \$4.4 billion in humanitarian aid for Afghanistan in 2022. On Wednesday, it said it needed a further \$3.6 billion for health and education, basic infrastructure, promotion of livelihoods and social cohesion, specifically the needs of women and girls.

The United Nations has pledged to work with countries to ensure that funds are not diverted or misused, but the U.N. special envoy on Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, noted on Wednesday that there was still reluctance among donors to free up funds.

"It is clear that donors, who face their own domestic constituencies, are still not satisfied with the political progress in Afghanistan and are watching closely for encouraging signals," Lyons said.

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HEADLINE	01/26 ISIS hostages: children in Syria prison
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/world/middleeast/syria-prison-hostage-boys-isis.html
GIST	<p>BEIRUT, Lebanon — The boys in the prison sleep in groups of about 15 in cells with no windows, according to aid workers.</p> <p>They get fresh air and see the sun during visits to a walled-in yard, but receive no visitors. They range in age from as young as 10 up to 18 and have received no schooling since they were detained three or more years ago.</p> <p>Now, their lives are at risk in a pitched battle over control of the prison.</p> <p>Islamic State fighters who attacked the prison on Thursday to free their comrades are holding the boys hostage as human shields. A Kurdish-led militia backed by American troops is trying to retake the prison. Hundreds of fighters have been reported killed.</p> <p>The battle has yanked from the shadows the bleak plight of the nearly 700 boys detained at the prison in Hasaka, Syria. They are among the tens of thousands of children held in prisons and detention camps in northeastern Syria because their parents belonged to the Islamic State.</p>

The Kurdish-led militia that operates the prison, known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, or S.D.F., says that the children's ties to the Islamic State make them dangerous. It has also criticized foreign governments for refusing to repatriate their citizens held in the camps and prisons, including the children.

But aid workers and human rights advocates say detaining the children punishes them for the sins of their parents — and could fuel the very radicalization that the authorities who locked them up say they want to prevent.

“Under international law, putting children in detention should be a last resort,” said Bo Viktor Nylund, the representative for Syria for the United Nations children's agency, UNICEF. “The whole aspect of these children as victims of their circumstances has not been taken into account.”

After days of fighting, the battle for the prison, in the city of Hasaka, is now centered on one three-story building that houses the kitchen, clothing workshop, clinic and barbershop, said Farhad Shami, an S.D.F. spokesman. The upper floors of that building are the children's ward, where the 700 boys were detained.

About 500 ISIS members, both attackers and the adult prisoners who joined them, are believed to be inside the building holding the workers and boys hostage, Mr. Shami said. Fifteen workers and about 20 boys managed to flee on Monday, he said, but ISIS was using the others as human shields, complicating S.D.F. efforts to retake the building.

Mr. Shami said he did not know how many of the boys had been killed or wounded. But Letta Tayler, a director with Human Rights Watch who tracks the Syria detentions, wrote on Twitter that she had spoken with two men and one boy inside the surrounded building, and they said they had seen many dead and wounded boys. They also said they had run out of food and water and had burned their mattresses to cook before the food ran out.

The detention crisis in northeastern Syria has its roots in the collapse of the Islamic State's so-called caliphate, which at its height was about the size of Britain and stretched into Syria and Iraq.

An international military coalition led by the United States partnered with the S.D.F. to fight the jihadists in Syria, pushing them from their last patch of territory in March 2019.

The S.D.F. detained those who survived in an ad hoc network of prisons for the men and camps for the women and children, expecting that the countries the fighters and their families had come from would take them back. But most countries have refused, leaving the detainees languishing for years in squalid, dangerous camps and makeshift prisons, with no legal recourse.

Tens of thousands of children, most of them Syrians and Iraqis, live in the area's two main camps, along with thousands of children of other nationalities, said Ardian Shajkovci, director of the American Counterterrorism Targeting and Resilience Institute, which has researched the issue.

From 200 to 220 children are believed to be in two rehabilitation centers run by the S.D.F.-affiliated administration that governs the area.

The S.D.F. has long resisted providing information about the number of boys in its prisons, but Mr. Shajkovci said there are about 700 in the Hasaka facility and about 35 in another lockup in the city of Qamishli. Most are Syrians and Iraqis, but about 150 are foreigners.

In 2019, when The New York Times first reported on the presence of children in the Hasaka prison, they were dressed in orange jumpsuits and crammed in normal cells near the adult prisoners.

Since then, their conditions have marginally improved, according to aid workers. They were segregated from the adults and moved to their own building on the north side of the compound, where there are three floors with about 15 cells each.

Aid groups have brought them blankets, mattresses, hygiene supplies and clothes. They have communal bathrooms and their own yard where they get regular recreation time.

Over the last 15 months, their number increased to 700 from about 550, aid workers said, when the S.D.F. moved some adolescents from the camps to the prison. In some cases, that meant separating them from their mothers, who remained in the camps.

They were removed for a variety of reasons: some after security incidents, some because the S.D.F. thought they had reached a “dangerous” age, or because of worries they would impregnate women in the camps, according to aid workers and Mr. Shajkovci, the researcher.

Mr. Shami, the S.D.F. spokesman, denied that any boys had been moved from the camps to the prison but said some had been taken to rehabilitation centers because they were at risk of getting radicalized in the camps, where many detainees remain steadfast supporters of the caliphate.

He called all the boys in the prison “cubs of the caliphate,” the name ISIS used for children trained to fight, and said they had been captured in ISIS bases and could have been trained to carry out suicide bombings.

Mr. Nylund of UNICEF acknowledged that some of the boys could have played roles in combat but said it was difficult to determine each child’s background and that some had clearly been too young to fight. None of the boys have been charged with a crime or seen a judge.

And none of those circumstances mitigated the danger to the boys now, Mr. Nylund said.

“These children are at very close risk of falling both as targets in the crossfire and potentially being re-recruited or recruited for the first time and ending up in the hands of ISIS,” he said.

“We are calling on all parties to save the lives of these children, with a cease-fire, with negotiations, whatever it takes,” said Mehmet Balci, the founder and co-director of Fight for Humanity, a human rights group, who visited the prison three times.

Mr. Balci’s organization began a project last year to do individual assessments of the boys to provide them with educational, recreational and psychological support, he said in an interview.

His group had hired staff, purchased equipment, made plans for TV rooms for the boys and conducted two training sessions with the prison staff about child protection.

The ISIS attack had put everything on hold.

Mr. Balci said the project could have made a bad situation for the boys a little better, but without changing what he saw as the fundamental injustice.

“These children should not have been there,” he said. “This is not their place.”

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HEADLINE	01/26 Afghanistan suffers a humanitarian crisis
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/freezing-afghanistan-aid-workers-rush-save-millions-82503836
GIST	PUL-E-ALAM, Afghanistan -- A flickering flame of paper, rags and random twigs is the only heat Gulnaz has to keep her 18-month-old son warm, barely visible beneath his icy blanket as she begs on a bitterly cold highway on the road to Kabul.

The 70-kilometer (45-mile) stretch of highway is flanked by snow-swept hills. Occasionally a driver slows his car and shoves an Afghani note into the 28-year-old woman's bare, dirt-caked hand. She sits for hours on the highway medium, positioned just beyond a bump in the road that slows traffic.

Her 16-year-old sister, Khalida, sits nearby. Both are hidden behind encompassing blue burqas. By the end of the day, Gulnaz, who gave just the one name, says they might make 300 Afghanis (\$2.85). But most days it is less.

The Taliban's sweep to power in Afghanistan in August drove billions of dollars in international assistance out of the country and sent an already dirt-poor nation, ravaged by war, drought and floods, spiraling toward a humanitarian catastrophe.

But in recent weeks it is the bitter winter cold that is devastating the most vulnerable and has international aid organizations scrambling to save millions from starving or freezing because they have neither food nor fuel. For the poorest the only heat or means of cooking is with the coal or wood they can scrounge from the snowy streets or that they receive from aid groups.

"The extent of the problem now in Afghanistan for people is dire," said Shelley Thakral, spokeswoman for the World Food Program in Afghanistan. "We're calling this a race against time. We need to get to families in very difficult, hard to reach areas. It's winter, it's cold, the snow."

The cost of the humanitarian effort is staggering. Thakral said the WFP alone will need \$2.6 billion this year.

"Break that number down. That's \$220 million a month, that's 30 cents per person per day, and that's what we're asking for. . . . We need the money because we need to reach people as quickly as we can," she said.

Earlier this month the United Nations launched its largest single country appeal for more than \$5 billion to help a devastated Afghanistan.

It's estimated that roughly 90 percent of Afghanistan's 38 million people are dependent on aid and the U.N. says nearly 3 million are displaced in their own country, driven from their homes by drought, war and famine.

In 2020 alone, 700,000 Afghans became displaced, many living in desperate conditions on the outskirts of cities, in parks and open spaces, wherever they could erect a makeshift shelter.

Gulnaz migrated to central Logar province from the northern province of Kunduz, where her husband had been a shoemaker. But his work dried up with war and the coming of the Taliban and "we have come here," she said as she sat with her sister on the side of the highway linking Logar's capital, Pul-e-Alam, with Kabul.

"We have no heat at home and every day whether it is raining or snowing we come and sit here," she said.

In Pul-e-Alam, where temperatures in January and February can drop to lows of minus-16 degrees Celsius (3 degrees Fahrenheit), thousands of men and women line up in the bitter cold to collect a World Food Program ration of flour, oil, salt and lentils.

The WFP surveyed the city for the neediest, giving each a voucher to collect their rations, but word spread quickly through the snow- and mud-covered streets that food was being distributed and soon scores of men and women pushed and pleaded for rations. Fights broke out among some in the crowd and security forces tried to cordon those without vouchers off to one side.

Each day for a week this month the WFP distributed rations to as many as 500 families a day, said Hussain Andisha, who manages the distribution. Most people in Logar province are desperate, he said.

As he spoke, four women in burqas slipped past the men at the gate taking vouchers. None had a ration card, but they pleaded for food. One woman, who gave her name only as Sadarat, said her husband was a drug addict — a devastating problem that has mushroomed in the past two decades, with as many as 1 million people, or 8% of Afghanistan's population, counted as addicts, according to the U.N. Afghanistan produces over 4,000 tons annually of opium. the raw material used to make heroin.

“I don't know where he is. I have no food for my children. Please I need something,” she said.

Like hundreds of thousands of Afghans, poverty and conflict drove Sadarat and her five children from their rural home in Logar province's Charkh district to the capital, 38 kilometers (24 miles) away.

Shouting from behind Sadarat, another women, Riza Gul, said she has 10 children and a husband who earns less than \$1 a day as a laborer on the days he can find work.

“What can we do? Where can we go?” she pleaded.

Andisha said the January distribution would provide staples to 2,250 families in Pul-e-Alam, the capital of roughly 23,000 people. Already the WFP has surveyed the seven districts of Logar province and begun distribution in four. Roads are deep in snow and passage for the hundreds of trucks transporting the food is slow going and can be treacherous.

Andisha said the need is desperate and gets worse with each passing day.

“Even from the first day we arrived here, the situation has worsened. People have no jobs,” he said, adding that women who were working before the Taliban took power “now cannot work in government departments.”

"It is certain the situation will worsen," he said.

The Taliban administration in Logar has not interfered in the WFP aid work, Andisha added, and has provided security at distribution sites.

Thakral, the WFP spokeswoman, said donor contributions go directly to the people, even as aid organizations and the international community struggle to address one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters without dealing directly with Afghanistan's Taliban rulers.

“People come first and that’s important to remember in this humanitarian crisis,” she said. “We work independently from the de facto government so the assurance there is that any donation received will be given directly to the people.”

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/26 Truck strikes protester in Tacoma; flees
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article257762933.html
GIST	<p>A woman attending a protest in downtown Tacoma was struck and injured Wednesday night by a pickup truck that drove away from the scene, according to witnesses and a photographer from KIRO 7 News.</p> <p>Photographer Jonathan Simmons tweeted fleeting footage of the truck driving away from the scene, saying the incident happened “right in front of me and dozens of others.”</p> <p>Tacoma Police are investigating the incident, and emergency crews from the Tacoma Fire Department responded to the scene.</p>

	<p>Police spokeswoman Wendy Haddow said the incident occurred at 6:10 p.m., adding that the truck “went over a curb and struck a pedestrian, then sped southbound” on East D Street. The woman suffered a broken hip, and was transported to a local hospital.</p> <p>“Suspect vehicle not located yet,” Haddow said.</p> <p>The protesters were responding to a meeting at LeMay - America’s Car Museum, the site of a “business summit” organized by local organization Tacoma Safe, which a number of local public officials attended.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/25 SAT will go completely digital by 2024
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/us/sat-test-digital.html
GIST	<p>The SAT will soon be taken exclusively on a computer, the College Board announced on Tuesday, ending an era in which high schoolers have had to make sure their No. 2 pencils were sharpened and their answer bubbles were completely filled in.</p> <p>The exam, which students will complete on laptops or tablets at testing centers, will also be shortened from three hours to two hours. The changes will begin in 2024 in the United States and in 2023 in other countries.</p> <p>The College Board is trying to retool the exam that has stressed out millions of students in the face of questions about whether college admissions tests are fair, or even necessary.</p> <p>A growing number of colleges have eliminated the requirement that applicants submit scores from the SAT or the competing ACT, and the trend of “test-optional” admissions accelerated greatly during the coronavirus pandemic. More than 1,800 schools did not require standardized test scores for 2022 admissions, according to the nonprofit organization FairTest.</p> <p>The number of SAT test takers declined from 2.2 million high schoolers who graduated in 2020 to 1.5 million in the class of 2021, according to the College Board. About 1.7 million students in the class of 2022 have taken the test to date.</p> <p>In addition to its transition to a digital test, the College Board will also allow calculators on the entire math section, shorten reading passages and reflect a wider range of topics.</p> <p>In pilot runs that were conducted last year, 80 percent of students said they found the digital tests less stressful, according to the College Board, which said laptops or tablets would be provided for students who need them.</p> <p>Priscilla Rodriguez, vice president of college readiness assessments for the College Board, said the changes would make the test more relevant.</p> <p>“In a largely test-optional world, the SAT is a lower-stakes test in college admissions,” Ms. Rodriguez said in a statement. “Submitting a score is optional for every type of college, and we want the SAT to be the best possible option for students.”</p> <p>Christal Wang, a junior at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Va., took both the digital test and the pencil test last year. She said the digital version had shorter reading passages with one or two questions, while the traditional test had longer passages that required several responses.</p> <p>“I definitely preferred that format with the shorter passages, just because it was a lot easier to read and easier to stay focused,” Ms. Wang, 16, said. “I also felt less drained at the end.”</p>

In recent years, the SAT has come under increasing criticism from those who say that standardized tests handicap poor and minority students, partly because they may not have access to expensive test preparation classes.

Bob Schaeffer, executive director of FairTest, which questions the use of standardized tests in college admissions, said in a statement that the shift to a digital SAT “does not magically transform it to a more accurate, fairer or valid tool for assessing college readiness.”

In response to criticism of its test, the College Board has said that SAT scores serve to strengthen the applications of many students who test better than their high school grade-point averages would indicate.

Some college administrators said the upcoming move to a digital platform was overdue. A year ago, the College Board announced it would do away with SAT subject tests and the essay question.

“It’s about time that they’ve moved away from paper and pencil,” said Kent R. Hopkins, vice president for academic enterprise enrollment at Arizona State University. Mr. Hopkins, who serves on a College Board advisory panel, said he was hopeful that the new format would enhance security and make the test less “clunky.”

The large public school has historically been test-optional, although most of its applicants submit standardized test scores, Mr. Hopkins said.

College admissions testing centers were forced to shut down early in the pandemic, and many colleges — including some of the nation’s leading institutions — waived the requirements, at least temporarily. Some have eliminated them altogether.

[The University of California system](#) announced last year that standardized test scores would no longer be a factor in admissions decisions at its 10 schools after it settled a lawsuit claiming that the test created inequities in assessing a student’s chances of success in college.

After the decision by California’s prestigious public system, Harvard, one of the country’s most elite private schools, announced in December that it would [not require the SAT or ACT](#) through the next four years, a move observers thought would [expedite the movement to eliminate standardized test scores](#).

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HEADLINE	01/26 Extraordinary iceberg gone, not forgotten
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/climate/iceberg-a68a-antarctica.html
GIST	<p>Perhaps you remember iceberg A68a, which enjoyed a few minutes of fame back in 2017 when it broke off an ice shelf on the Antarctic Peninsula. Hardly your everyday iceberg, it was one of the biggest ever seen, more than 100 miles long and 30 miles wide.</p> <p>The iceberg drifted slowly through the icy Weddell Sea for a few years, before picking up steam as it entered the Southern Ocean. When last we heard from it, in 2020, it was bearing down on the island of South Georgia in the South Atlantic, a bit shrunken and battered from a journey of more than a thousand miles.</p> <p>Alas, ol’ A68a is no more. Last year, some 100 miles from South Georgia, it finally did what all icebergs eventually do: thinned so much that it broke up into small pieces that eventually drifted off to nothingness.</p> <p>In its prime, A68a was nearly 800 feet thick, though all but 120 feet of that was hidden below the waterline.</p> <p>Ecologists and others had feared that during its journey the iceberg might become grounded near South Georgia. That could have kept the millions of penguins and seals that live and breed there from reaching their feeding areas in the ocean.</p>

That didn't happen. New research shows that A68a performed more of a drive-by and most likely only struck a feature on the seafloor briefly as it turned and kept going until it broke up.

But the research also revealed another potential threat from the iceberg to ecosystems around South Georgia. As it traveled through the relatively warm waters of the Southern Ocean into the South Atlantic, it melted from below, eventually releasing a huge quantity of fresh water into the sea near the island. The influx of so much fresh water could affect plankton and other organisms in the marine food chain.

The scientists, led by Anne Braakmann-Folgmann, a doctoral student at the Center for Polar Observation and Modeling at the University of Leeds in Britain, used satellite imagery to monitor the shape and location of the iceberg over the course of its journey. (Like other large Antarctic icebergs, it was named according to a convention established by the U.S. National Ice Center, which is a bit less flashy than the one used for hurricanes.)

The imagery showed how the area of the iceberg changed over time. The researchers also determined its thickness using data from satellites that measure ice height. By the time it broke up, Ms. Braakmann-Folgmann said, A68a was more than 200 feet thinner overall.

A68a left its mark. The researchers, whose findings were published in the journal *Remote Sensing of Environment*, estimated that melting in the vicinity of South Georgia resulted in the release of about 150 billion tons of fresh water. That's enough to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool 61 million times over, the researchers said, although because the ice was already floating its melting did not contribute to sea-level rise.

Not only is the water fresh, not salty, but it also contains a large amount of iron and other nutrients. Ms. Braakmann-Folgmann is helping another group of researchers, from the British Antarctic Survey, who are trying to determine the ecological effects of the iceberg and the meltwater.

When the iceberg was near South Georgia, scientists with the survey were able to deploy autonomous underwater gliders to take water samples. On the island, they used tracking devices on some gentoo penguins and fur seals, to see whether the presence of the iceberg affected their foraging behavior.

Geraint Tarling, a biological oceanographer with the survey, said that preliminary findings from the tracking data showed that the penguins and seals did not alter foraging routes, as they might have had the iceberg blocked their way or affected their prey.

"At least in the areas of the colonies that we saw, the impacts from the iceberg itself are not as devastating as we first feared," Dr. Tarling said.

But there is still much data to analyze, Dr. Tarling suggested, especially the water samples. A large influx of fresh water on the surface could affect the growth of phytoplankton, at the lower end of the food chain, or it could alter the mix of phytoplankton species available, he said.

Complicating the analysis is that 2020, when the iceberg was nearing South Georgia, also happened to be a bad year for krill, the small crustaceans that are just above phytoplankton in the food chain.

Dr. Tarling said that although A68a did not become grounded, a few other large icebergs have in recent decades. Grounding and dragging of an iceberg can wreak havoc on ecosystems on or near the seafloor, he said.

And climate change could potentially lead to more grounding episodes. Warming is causing parts of the huge Antarctic ice sheets to flow faster toward the ocean, leading to more calving of icebergs that then travel north.

	"What we're looking at is a lot more movement of icebergs that could actually gouge these areas of the sea floor," Dr. Tarling said.
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HEADLINE	01/26 'Really weird' space object detected
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/space-object-radio-bursts-magnetic-neutron-star/
GIST	<p>Astronomers have discovered a "really weird" object 4,000 lightyears away from Earth, a study published in Nature on Wednesday said. The object disappears from view every other minute and emits a giant burst of radio waves three times an hour.</p> <p>The mysterious object was first seen by Curtin University student Tyrone O'Doherty when he was observing the sky in outback Western Australia. "It's exciting that the source I identified last year has turned out to be such a peculiar object," O'Doherty said in a press release.</p> <p>The object, which the astronomers say is unlike anything else they've discovered, sends out a massive beam of radiation that, every 20 minutes, becomes one of the brightest in the sky. It also spins and disappears every other minute.</p> <p>Space objects that "turn" on and off in the night sky are called "transients" by scientists, and they're relatively common.</p> <p>"When studying transients, you're watching the death of a massive star or the activity of the remnants it leaves behind," ICRAR-Curtin astrophysicist and co-author of the study Dr. Gemma Anderson said.</p> <p>Slower transients, such as supernovae, can appear in a few days and stick around for a couple of months. Fast transients, like some neutron stars, "flash" on and off multiple times in a second. But transients in between those two speeds are rare, and the latest discovery — in the words of the astronomers — is "really weird" and "completely unexpected."</p> <p>"It was kind of spooky for an astronomer because there's nothing known in the sky that does that," said astrophysicist Dr. Natasha Hurley-Walker, who led the team of scientists. "And it's really quite close to us — about 4000 lightyears away. It's in our galactic backyard."</p> <p>Hurley-Walker described the mysterious object as smaller than the sun but bright, and emitting highly-polarized radio waves three times an hour. These radio pulses indicate that it has an "extremely strong" magnetic field — and may match a predicted astrophysical object that has never been proven to exist. Scientists call the theoretical object an "ultra-long period magnetar."</p> <p>"It's a type of slowly spinning neutron star that has been predicted to exist theoretically," Hurley-Walker said. "But nobody expected to directly detect one like this because we didn't expect them to be so bright. Somehow it's converting magnetic energy to radio waves much more effectively than anything we've seen before."</p> <p>The astronomers currently believe that it may be a rare type of neutron star or a collapsing white dwarf, but they need to observe it again to determine if it is a fluke or a new type of space object.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Lab hits milestone on fusion power
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/hot-stuff-lab-hits-milestone-long-road-fusion-82486343
GIST	With 192 lasers and temperatures more than three times hotter than the center of the sun, scientists hit — at least for a fraction of a second — a key milestone on the long road toward nearly pollution-free fusion energy.

Researchers at the National Ignition Facility at the Lawrence Livermore National Lab in California were able to spark a fusion reaction that briefly sustained itself — a major feat because fusion requires such high temperatures and pressures that it easily fizzles out.

The ultimate goal, still years away, is to generate power the way the sun generates heat, by smooshing hydrogen atoms so close to each other that they combine into helium, which releases torrents of energy.

A team of more than 100 scientists published the results of four experiments that achieved what is known as a burning plasma in Wednesday's journal *Nature*. With those results, along with preliminary results announced last August from follow-up experiments, scientists say they are on the threshold of an even bigger advance: ignition. That's when the fuel can continue to "burn" on its own and produce more energy than what's needed to spark the initial reaction.

"We're very close to that next step," said study lead author Alex Zylstra, an experimental physicist at Livermore.

Nuclear fusion presses together two types of hydrogen found in water molecules. When they fuse, "a small amount (milligrams) of fuel produces enormous amounts of energy and it's also very 'clean' in that it produces no radioactive waste," said Carolyn Kuranz, a University of Michigan experimental plasma physicist who wasn't part of the research. "It's basically limitless, clean energy that can be deployed anywhere," she said.

Researchers around the world have been working on the technology for decades, trying different approaches. Thirty-five countries are collaborating on a project in Southern France called the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor that uses enormous magnets to control the superheated plasma. That is expected to begin operating in 2026.

Earlier experiments in the United States and United Kingdom succeeded in fusing atoms, but achieved no self-heating, said Steven Cowley, director of the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory, who wasn't part of this study.

But don't bank on fusion just yet.

"The result is scientifically very exciting for us," said study co-author Omar Hurricane, chief scientist for Lawrence Livermore's fusion program. "But we're a long way from useful energy."

Maybe decades, he said.

It's already taken several years inside a lab that is straight out of *Star Trek* — one of the movies used the lab as background visuals for the *Enterprise*'s engine room — and many failed attempts to get to this point. One adjustment that helped: Researchers made the fuel capsule about 10% bigger. Now it's up to the size of a BB.

That capsule fits in a tiny gold metal can that researchers aim 192 lasers at. They heat it to about 100 million degrees, creating about 50% more pressure inside the capsule than what's inside the center of the sun. These experiments created burning plasmas that lasted just a trillionth of a second, but that was enough to be considered a success, Zylstra said.

Overall, the four experiments in the *Nature* study — conducted in November 2020 and February 2021 — produced as much as 0.17 megajoules of energy. That's far more than previous attempts, but still less than one-tenth of the power used to start the process, Zylstra said. A megajoule is about enough energy to heat a gallon of water 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius).

Preliminary results from experiments done later in 2021, which are still being reviewed by other scientists, pushed energy output to 1.3 megajoules and lasted 100 trillionths of a second, according to a government press release. But even that is shy of the 1.9 megajoules needed to break even.

	“The major problem with fusion is that it is hard,” said Princeton’s Cowley. “Otherwise, it might be the perfect way to make energy -- sustainable, plentiful, safe and minimal environmental impact.”
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/26 Dozens of robberies strike marijuana shops
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/crime/washington-pot-shops-call-on-the-state-to-improve-protection-from-violent-robberies/281-20fc84ad-d287-4990-bc1b-7ca96875d6f1
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — There have been dozens of cannabis shop robberies in the last few months in western Washington.</p> <p>Some cannabis shop owners feel the state is not doing enough to protect their businesses.</p> <p>On Jan. 19, four armed men in masks burst into Green Lady Marijuana in Lynnwood, forcing the employees to the ground before making off with \$6,000 in cash and \$2,000 in product.</p> <p>Assistant manager Monique Conrad spoke with KING 5 shortly after the robbery.</p> <p>"There's been a lot of robberies and a lot of shootings in dispensaries in the last couple months," Conrad said.</p> <p>Tom Bout, the founder of the Cannabis Professionals Network, made a spreadsheet tracking the crimes he could find records for.</p> <p>"I think that people would be shocked to learn how frequent these pot shops have been hit over the last three months," Bout said.</p> <p>He counted more than 30 crimes since November 2021.</p> <p>"I can tell you that there is risk involved with marijuana retail stores ... their business is essentially a cash-only business," said Brian Smith, spokesperson for the Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Board.</p> <p>The board has been working to communicate safety guidelines with business owners.</p> <p>Bout said that's not enough.</p> <p>"They have not communicated with the stores. Like, you'd think that they would put on an alert to let everyone know that this has happened," he said.</p> <p>Since law enforcement agencies handle the robberies, the Liquor and Cannabis Board said it is not always notified when a crime happens.</p> <p>"This is a criminal thing that local law enforcement handles. The Liquor and Cannabis Board is an administrative body, we licensed them," Smith said.</p> <p>Bout says he "kind of" understands that, but believes they should be more proactive.</p> <p>"I don't think that they should be sitting back waiting for it. They should be figuring out a way to be more proactive. You know what I mean? Instead of waiting for it to come to them, they should be figuring out a way to fix it," Bout said.</p>

	<p>The state Liquor and Cannabis Board said it is communicating these safety tips with cannabis retailers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hire armed security guards • Make frequent cash deposits so there isn't much cash available in shops • Post signs in businesses explaining that staff don't have access to much cash • Clearly communicate safety guidelines with staff so they know what to do in the event of a robbery.
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HEADLINE	01/26 Convicted murderer in escaping teens
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/several-juveniles-escape-snoqualmie-detention-center/3BDUDTHJBZBLLPNCL6CDATFA2M/
GIST	<p>SNOQUALMIE, Wash. — Authorities are searching for five teens who escaped from Echo Glen Children’s Center in Snoqualmie.</p> <p>The teens are between 14 to 17 years old. They have violent records, including one with a murder conviction.</p> <p>The King County Sheriff’s Office identified the teen with a murder conviction as 15-year-old Timothy Hernandez-Ebanks.</p> <p>He is considered to be the most dangerous, investigators said.</p> <p>Hernandez-Ebanks was convicted for fatally shooting a man.</p> <p>According to court documents, Hernandez-Ebanks was walking down a Burien street on the night of April 2020 when he pulled out a loaded 9 mm handgun and randomly shot 35-year-old Hassan Ali Hassan.</p> <p>Hernandez-Ebanks shot Hassan in the back of the head because “he just felt like doing it,” court documents state.</p> <p>Police said he confessed to the crime, and he was eventually sent to Echo Glen Children’s Center.</p> <p>But on Wednesday morning, Hernandez-Ebanks escaped with several other teens.</p> <p>Investigators said the teens strong-armed several employees at the facility and stole a car at around 7:45 a.m.</p> <p>The teenagers fled in a blue 2018 Ford Fusion belonging to the facility. It has a Washington license plate 27545E.</p> <p>Echo Glen Children’s Center is a security facility that is not fenced but is bordered by natural wetlands.</p> <p>The facility provides treatment services for younger male offenders and is the only institution for female offenders.</p> <p>The facility provides dialectical behavior therapy, aggression replacement treatment, cultural programming, sex offense-specific treatment and inpatient chemical dependency treatment, with gender-specific programming for females.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Judge releases prolific homeless shoplifter
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3326387/rantz-seattle-judge-releases-prolific-shoplifter/
GIST	A homeless man is charged with burglary for trying to steal a massive flat-screen television from the downtown Seattle Target. Staff say it was the 22nd time he stole from the store in the past 3 months.

The entire alleged incident was caught on surveillance footage obtained by the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH. And thanks to a lenient judge, the man was released on his own personal recognizance.

John Ray Lomack is a prolific offender who, according to the King County Prosecutor's Office, has an extensive criminal history.

During the holiday season, Lomack was banned from the department store, a location that has been under siege by organized theft and homeless shoplifters throughout much of COVID. Staff told police that he's cost them \$6,000 in stolen property since October.

But the trespass order didn't keep Lomack from returning. He had his eye on a brand new television priced to steal — literally.

'Prolific shoplifter' tries to take TV

Surveillance footage shows Lomack wandering around the Target's second floor, just outside the electronics department.

According to court document, Target security recognized the "prolific shoplifter" from previous run-ins at the store, which they say included physical assaults of employees on previous incidents.

As staff called the police, Lomack is seen eyeing three 70" television sets that are bound together by plastic straps. They retail for \$749.99 each.

Lomack approaches the TVs, reached into his pocket while he looks around the store, and surreptitiously pulls something from his pocket. He uses the tool to cut the plastic straps and free the television.

He then pauses again, wanders around to the other side of the television display, before slyly pushing one of the sets into an aisle. Surveillance footage cuts to Lomack then pushing the television on a shopping cart and into one of the elevators.

Lomack struggles with the massive television

Lomack emerges with the elevator to find security waiting for him. He ignores them completely while continuing to walk out with the television.

He gets more aggressive as security tries to grab the television and keep it in the store. Police note they see him shoving one of the security staff.

"At no point in time did he attempt to pay for the item," the court document notes.

The homeless offender was not willing to give up the television. Despite struggling to maneuver the 70" inch screen out of the store, he finally made it out.

Once outside, it looks like he needed to take a breather. Surveillance footage shows him leaning on the boxed television for several moments, perhaps to catch his breath.

After a few beats, he then drags the television down the street.

Police are not impressed by Lomack's taste in televisions

An officer on patrol was flagged by Target security. They told him Lomack had just stolen the television. The officer quickly spotted him dragging the stolen item away from the Target. When the officer contacted the suspect, "and advised him to unhand the property," he refused and "stated that he had paid" for it. But, police note, "he was unable to produce a receipt."

A second officer arrived and "immediately recognized Lomack as a person trespassed from the Target for multiple thefts."

Lomack was told he was under arrest, but he refused to comply. After a “physical struggle,” officers put him in handcuffs.

The trespass notice

Lomack was arrested for burglary on October 18 after being detained for shoplifting at the same Target. He was trespassed for one year as a result.

Body-cam footage from the incident shows him refusing to accept the notice that he may not enter the store again.

“I don’t want to talk to you bro,” he tells the officer.

Lomack accused the officer of being racist. Then police warned him of the legal consequences if he were to return and if he were to steal.

“I didn’t steal nothin’, man!” he responded. “No man! I didn’t burglarize nothin’. I’m not coming back to the store no more.”

Judge Kuljinder Dhillon released him

A King County prosecutor argued that Lomack should be held on \$5,000 bail. She noted “warrant activity” on his 32 prior cases.

Since 1985, Lomack has been convicted of at least 18 felonies and misdemeanors, including second-degree burglary, second-degree possession of stolen property, and fourth-degree assault. This represents only a fraction of the cases that came through to the prosecutor’s office, according to a spokesperson.

Judge Kuljinder Dhillon was unmoved by the argument. He released him on his own personal recognizance.

Dhillon has a history of going easy on homeless suspects — including violent ones.

After a homeless man was accused of gouging the eye of a Seattle Police officer, Dhillon [lowered a \\$25,000 bail request to just \\$1,000](#). It made it easier for the Northwest Community Bail Fund, a radical, left-wing abolitionist group, to pay his bail.

Returns on arraignment and then released again

After some delays due to the holidays plus a continuance, Lomack was back in court on January 26 in front of Judge Melinda Young. But again, he was released.

Court documents call Lomack “medically unavailable” and cite he would “continue to quarantine until his quarantine period is done.”

It indicates Lomack is either COVID-positive or came into contact with a COVID-positive person. Like Judge Dhillon, Young also has a record of going easy on homeless suspects.

[The judge previously lowered the bail request from \\$20,000 to \\$5,000 on a homeless man](#) accused of assault and robbery. His lowered bail was paid by the NCBF. A month later, the man was accused of stabbing someone to death.

Lomack concerns the prosecutor’s office

Lomack is expected to quarantine at a homeless hotel operated by the Public Defender Association Equity Just Care Program. In a letter to the court, clinical supervisor Gigi Huang claimed Lomack is a model resident.

	<p>“It is our belief that John will continue to show progress at a 24/7 transitional housing program and work closely with our counselors on site,” Huang wrote.</p> <p>But the KCPO is not so sure.</p> <p>“We’re concerned with the defendant’s pattern of repeat behavior and are concerned it’s going to continue,” KCPO spokesperson Casey McNerthney told the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH. “We’re also concerned he’s unlikely to return to court with his extensive criminal history that includes warrant activity on 32 cases. Only a fraction of those cases [go] to the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office.”</p> <p>McNerthney notes that most shoplifting cases are referring to the City Attorney’s office. But, he notes, “when there is an extenuating circumstance like this case involving a prolific offender, we file a felony case.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Prince Andrew demands a jury trial
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/prince-andrew-demands-jury-trial-in-sex-abuse-suit-11643231288?mod=hp_listc_pos3
GIST	<p>Prince Andrew formally responded to a lawsuit accusing him of sexually abusing a teen decades ago, broadly denying the allegations and demanding a trial by jury.</p> <p>In a court filing Wednesday, the British royal said he didn’t sexually assault Virginia Giuffre in the early 2000s. Ms. Giuffre alleged in a lawsuit last year that disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein and British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell coerced her into having sex with Prince Andrew when she was 17.</p> <p>Earlier this month a judge overseeing the lawsuit denied the royal’s request to dismiss the suit, leading him to formally respond to Ms. Giuffre’s complaint. While Prince Andrew again called for the lawsuit’s dismissal in Wednesday’s filing, he also demanded a jury trial, setting the stage for a public showdown with his accuser in the fall.</p> <p>While not admitting any fault, Prince Andrew said if Ms. Giuffre suffered any abuse, then she and others were at fault.</p> <p>David Boies, a lawyer for Ms. Giuffre, said Prince Andrew tries to blame the victim in his filing.</p> <p>“We look forward to confronting Prince Andrew with his denials and attempts to blame Ms. Giuffre for her own abuse at his deposition and at trial,” he said in a statement.</p> <p>The royal, who is the second son of Queen Elizabeth and ninth in line to the British throne, was recently stripped of his military affiliations and patronages, as Buckingham Palace has looked to distance itself from the legal battle. He also agreed to not use the title “His Royal Highness.”</p> <p>Last month, Ms. Maxwell was convicted of sex-trafficking charges for recruiting and grooming underage teens to perform sex acts on Epstein. Prince Andrew was one of several prominent figures who were mentioned during Ms. Maxwell’s three-week trial.</p> <p>Attorneys for Ms. Maxwell have said they plan to appeal the verdict. They have called Ms. Maxwell a scapegoat who wasn’t charged until nearly a year after Epstein died in a federal jail in August 2019. The New York City medical examiner ruled his death a suicide.</p> <p>In his latest filing, Prince Andrew denied most of Ms. Giuffre’s allegations or said he lacked sufficient information to respond. The royal admitted that he met Epstein around 1999 and that he flew on the financier’s jet. Epstein and Ms. Maxwell also attended Prince Andrew’s 40th birthday party in 2000, according to the filing. However, he said he never engaged in sexual acts with Ms. Giuffre.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 EO: sexual harassment in military a crime
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-signs-executive-order-making-sexual-harassment-a-crime-under-military-law-11643241271?mod=hp_listb_pos2
GIST	<p>President Biden signed an executive order Wednesday making sexual harassment a crime under military law, a change spurred by lawmakers' growing frustration at the military's inability to tackle the problem.</p> <p>Under the order, which takes effect immediately, troops can be charged under Article 134 of the Uniformed Code of Military Justice, which allows prosecution of crimes outlined by the president.</p> <p>The White House announced the president signed the order in a tweet Wednesday. It didn't release additional documents referenced in the order.</p> <p>The Pentagon referred all questions to the White House.</p> <p>The president's order in how sexual harassment cases are prosecuted is encompassed in the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act, which passed the Senate by a vote of 88-11 in December.</p> <p>Under the current UCMJ, there is no charge for sexual harassment. Instead, military prosecutors have used other sections of the military code to charge troops with crimes, including violating a general order, dereliction of duty or maltreatment of a subordinate, the latter in instances where a service member harassed someone of lower rank.</p> <p>Mr. Biden's order "cleans things up for prosecutors. Before, if there was a gap in the law, they had to draft their own charging language," said Eric Carpenter, a former Army lawyer and a professor of military law at Florida International University College of Law. "It also puts service members on notice that the president and the Department of Defense are taking these issues seriously."</p> <p>For the past year, the military has called combating sexual assault and harassment a priority, but internal reports concluded that the number of instances only increased during that time.</p> <p>According to the most recent Defense Department report, there were 7,816 reported cases of sexual assault during fiscal year 2020, nine fewer cases than those reported the previous year but more than double the 3,327 reported in 2010.</p> <p>In July, Mr. Biden said he supported removing sexual harassment and assault cases from the chain of command and handing them to independent military lawyers.</p> <p>The case of Army Spc. Vanessa Guillen, who had reported being sexually harassed by supervisors before she was killed in 2020 by another soldier, highlighted the military's failing at curbing harassment and assault. The NDAA provision that led to the new military law was named after Spc. Guillen.</p> <p>Last year, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin convened a panel to propose ways for the military to better combat sexual assault. Among the panel's findings was a gap between how military commanders described sexual harassment and assault within their ranks and the experiences of junior members.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Navy officer pleads guilty in wide scandal
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/another-navy-officer-pleads-guilty-in-wide-spanning-scandal/
GIST	<p>SAN DIEGO (AP) — A U.S. Navy commander admitted in federal court to sending a Malaysian defense contractor classified ship schedules for the Navy's 7th Fleet in exchange for extravagant meals, luxury travel, cash and the services of prostitutes.</p> <p>Commander Stephen Shedd is the third member of the 7th Fleet to plead guilty to bribery charges in one of the Navy's worst corruption scandals, the U.S. Attorney's Office said in a statement Wednesday.</p>

Nine members of the 7th Fleet were indicted by a federal grand jury in March 2017 for conspiring with and receiving bribes from Leonard Francis.

Prosecutors said Francis' firm, Singapore-based Glenn Defense Marine Asia and its owner, known by his nickname "Fat Leonard," bribed Navy officers with fancy gifts, trips and prostitutes to provide classified information in order to beat competitors and overcharge for services.

The scheme cost the Navy some \$35 million.

"According to Shedd's admissions as set forth in his plea agreement, the defendants informed Francis of planned U.S. Navy ship movements by providing Francis with classified U.S. Navy ship schedules and narrative summaries of those schedules. The defendants provided Francis with internal, proprietary U.S. Navy information," the U.S. Attorney's Office statement said.

It was not clear what potential punishment Shedd will face after his plea in the court in San Diego. He is scheduled to be sentenced on July 21.

Shedd and his lawyer could not be immediately reached for comment.

The case has resulted in federal criminal charges against 34 Navy officials, defense contractors, including Francis, and the Glenn Defense Marine Asia corporation.

The trial of the six remaining defendants from the 7th Fleet is scheduled to begin Feb. 28.

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HEADLINE	01/26 KCSO: teens escape juvenile rehab facility
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/5-incarcerated-teens-attack-staff-escape-from-juvenile-facility-near-snoqualmie/
GIST	<p>Five teenagers, serving sentences for various felonies, attacked several staff members at Echo Glen Children's Center near Snoqualmie on Wednesday morning and escaped the state-run juvenile rehabilitation facility in a motor-pool car, according to the King County Sheriff's Office.</p> <p>The teens are all males between the ages of 14 and 17 — and two of them have escaped before, said sheriff's spokesperson Sgt. Tim Meyer. One of the boys was convicted of murder, while others were convicted of crimes including possession of stolen property and robbery, he said.</p> <p>An Echo Glen employee, who asked to remain unidentified because the person was not authorized to talk about the matter and feared being fired, identified one of the escapees as the Burien boy, now 15, who shot and killed a stranger two years ago. He was convicted of first-degree murder and second-degree unlawful possession of a firearm, and was sentenced in August to secure custody until his 21st birthday, according to King County prosecutors.</p> <p>The Seattle Times typically does not name juveniles accused or convicted of crimes unless they are prosecuted in adult court.</p> <p>Meyer didn't provide details of the escape but said the staff members were assaulted around 7:45 a.m., suffering minor injuries.</p> <p>The Echo Glen employee said that following the escape the entire campus was put into lockdown, and employees were eventually briefed by supervisors about what happened.</p> <p>All five of the escaped teens were being held in the Klickitat Cottage, the only maximum security house for males at Echo Glen. That cottage, which is separated from other housing, is locked from the outside, the employee said.</p>

The teens first overpowered two staff members inside the cottage, the employee said, recounting what supervisors told staff members about the incident. Then, when a nurse drove to the cottage to give daily medication to some of the detainees, “they put him in a hold from behind,” the employee said.

Employees were told the teens took the nurse’s keys and wallet, and also found a knife left by a staff member inside a drawer in the cottage, the employee said.

“They had access to the nurse’s car straight out the front door,” the employee said. “Then they just drove out the front road. There’s no gate, so there’s nothing to stop you from driving in or out.”

The front gate was broken about a year ago when a visitor who apparently was “high on drugs smashed into it” and has not been replaced, the employee said.

Four of the teens were in street clothes, while a fifth was in an orange jumpsuit used to designate a teen who is new to the facility or had recently acted out violently, the employee said. The teen in the jumpsuit was wearing street clothes underneath, the employee said.

Meyer identified the stolen car as a 2018 Ford Fusion that’s part of the state motor pool.

Warrants for escape and other charges are being issued for the arrest of the five juveniles, he said.

“Certainly we want to get these guys in custody,” he said.

A spokesperson for the Washington Department of Children, Youth and Families, which oversees Echo Glen, said in a statement Wednesday afternoon that all other teens have been accounted for and the campus is now secure.

“We are assembling a critical incident team to address risk immediately and determine the root causes. We are also working closely with our law enforcement partners during this investigation,” added Jason Wettstein, the spokesperson.

Wettstein later confirmed in an email that the front gate to the facility was damaged in April and was supposed to be repaired last year.

Patrol deputies and members of the sheriff’s Major Crimes Unit responded to Echo Glen School, in the 33000 block of Southeast 99th Street, and have alerted other area law enforcement agencies to be on the lookout for the teens, Meyer said.

Echo Glen Children’s Center is an medium/maximum security facility bordered by natural wetlands and is run by the state Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration under DCYF. It houses younger male offenders and is the only juvenile facility for female offenders. Older male offenders typically serve their sentences at Green Hill School in Chehalis.

In 2012, six teenagers escaped from Echo Glen after knocking a corrections officer unconscious and then dragging and locking her into a holding cell, according to news accounts at the time. The teens stole the officer’s keys and radio and ran into thick woods surrounding the property. All six were captured within a few hours.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Police probe Tacoma, Ruston fires as arson
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/crime/article257733523.html
GIST	Investigators in Tacoma and Ruston are looking into 12 fires suspected of being arson that broke out Tuesday night and early Wednesday morning, most of which occurred at residential buildings in Central Tacoma and northern areas of the city.

Firefighters were able to extinguish the flames without any injuries, and Tacoma Fire Department spokesperson Joe Meinecke credited their quick work with keeping the fires from turning deadly.

“People were in these places where these fires happened, and that’s really concerning,” Meinecke said. “Not only does that endanger our community, but it endangers our crews. We were thrilled that none of our folks were injured.”

Agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in Seattle were sent to assist Tacoma Police Department with its investigation of the fires, most of which occurred at several homes, an apartment building and detached garages. Ruston Police Department is also investigating a fire as arson. The News Tribune has not been able to reach a department representative for details.

Investigators do not have evidence that the fires are connected, but TPD spokesperson Wendy Haddow said police’s investigation will make that determination.

Assistant chief of EMS Mary Hallman described the fires as happening in two clusters, three of which were reported in Central Tacoma earlier in the evening Tuesday. Five other fires were reported in northern parts of Tacoma later in the night and in the early hours of Wednesday.

On Wednesday afternoon, police said three more possible arson fires occurred overnight and were discovered in the morning by employees coming into work. The fires caused minor damage and were reported in the 4000 block of 6th Avenue, the 1500 block of South Union Avenue and the 3200 block of South D Street.

Fire spokesperson Meinecke said he couldn’t describe what made those specific fires suspicious, but he said typical signs of arson include fires occurring in close proximity and the presence of accelerants. He said investigators often deem fires suspicious while looking into the cause of the fire and where it originated.

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HEADLINE	01/26 QAnon follower jailed 44mo. Jan 6 assault
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/january-6-nicolas-languerand-ganon-assault-sentence/
GIST	<p><i>Washington</i> – A South Carolina man who traveled to Washington, D.C., on January 6, 2021 and later assaulted officers outside the U.S. Capitol was sentenced to 44 months in jail on Wednesday.</p> <p>Nicholas Languerand, an avowed follower of the QAnon conspiracy, pleaded guilty in November to assaulting officers and faced a maximum of 20-years prison sentence. However, prosecutors asked the court to sentence Languerand to 51 months.</p> <p>This is one of the longest sentences handed down to a January 6 defendant yet. Robert Palmer, another man accused of assaulting an officer, received 63 months.</p> <p>Languerand will get credit for the over nine months that he has served, and was ordered to pay restitution of \$2,000 to the architect of the Capitol, who estimated that the attack caused about \$1.5 million in damage to the Capitol building.</p> <p>"The defendant engaged in, and pleaded guilty to, an extremely dangerous offense," Judge John Bates said. "It strikes at the very heart of the democratic rule of law."</p> <p>Prosecutors alleged that Langueand had thrown "a variety" of dangerous objects at police, including an orange traffic barrier and stick-like objects he seemed to have obtained from the surrounding crowd attacking the Capitol.</p> <p>And while he was at the Capitol, Langueran may have been armed, the government also wrote, citing social media activity in which the defendant said he was "carrying" in D.C. and in which he mentioned having a firearm at the Capitol. Notably, the government determined that his claim was unsubstantiated.</p>

While Languerand admitted he had participated in the assault on the Capitol, investigators say he showed little remorse and even indicated that he wanted to see more violence, alleging he had sent a message to an associate that read, "Violence isn't always the answer but in the face of tyranny violence may be the only answer," and "Next time we come back with rifles."

"I got some good shots in," he also allegedly wrote about his attacks on police.

Languerand's defense attorney William Welch, however, painted a more sympathetic picture of the defendant, asking Judge Bates to impose a sentence of a year plus one day in prison with credit for time served.

He was a child of addicts, Welch said, adding that his father had tried to kill his mother and that he was subjected to seemingly constant relocation during his school-age years. The defendant's life was anything but easy, his lawyers explained, arguing his past that should be taken into account at sentencing,

Languerand's grandmother, Susan Killion, also advocated for a lighter sentence due to the trauma inflicted on Languerand as a child. She said in court that after Languerand was laid off from his job prior to the Capitol riot, he became "isolated" from the rest of his family. Languerand's grandfather Charles Killion also spoke at the sentencing in support of his grandson.

"Whatever difficulties the defendant faced as a child, it's clear he overcame those difficulties, he got his high school diploma, he was accepted into the military, he functioned well before his [military] discharge, and he's maintained employment," Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Juman said, anticipating the defense's arguments, "A defendant's difficult childhood does not explain his choice to engage in violence on January 6th."

Investigators also found evidence of Languerand's adherence to the QAnon conspiracy theory in his home, including a notebook that contained some references.

During Wednesday's hearing, Languerand, who served in the Army, admitted he had been a QAnon acolyte but was misled by QAnon influencers, alluding to retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, an ally of former President Trump.

"Languerand's cellphone also contained pictures of the leaders of the Proud Boys, 13 the logo of the militia organization the Three Percenters, 14 pictures of Nazi iconography, and several images of Languerand wearing a Guy Fawkes mask and holding weapons and notes about Washington D.C.," investigators said.

In court on Wednesday, Bates said that Languerand's letter to the court was a mixture of "excuses and remorse" and that the letter was "not the complete commitment, disavowal, and acceptance of personal responsibility that one might hope to see." Bates added he did consider Languerand's childhood experiences in his sentencing.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Germany: attacker got weapons in Austria
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/german-police-university-attacker-weapons-austria-82487339
GIST	<p>BERLIN -- The 18-year-old gunman who opened fire Monday during a packed lecture at Heidelberg University in southwestern Germany bought three weapons about a week ago in Austria, German police said Wednesday. The gunman killed one person and wounded three others before killing himself.</p> <p>Two of these weapons were seized at the scene, along with around 150 rounds of ammunition. The third weapon, a rifle, was found by Austrian police in a room that the man, who was not identified by name in line with German privacy rules, had rented during his stay in Austria, Heidelberg police said in a statement.</p>

	<p>Police say the German man — who was a biology student at the university — purchased the two weapons used in the attack from a weapons dealer and the third from a private individual, both in Austria.</p> <p>The precise motive for the attack was still being investigated, but the suspect was known to have suffered from a psychological illness in the past.</p> <p>“It cannot be ruled out that a mental illness of the suspect could have been the cause of the crime,” the police statement said.</p> <p>Investigators are also following up on indications that the suspect was a previous member of a far-right party, which he is said to have left in 2019, when he was still a minor.</p> <p>Police identified the slain woman as a 23-year-old German. Those who suffered minor wounds were two German women, aged 19 and 20, and a 20-year-old German-Italian man. The shooting sparked a massive police response, with more than 400 officers sent to the scene.</p> <p>Heidelberg, which hosts one of Germany's best-known universities, is located south of Frankfurt and has about 160,000 residents.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Another journalist attacked in Mexico
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/journalist-attacked-mexico-killed-month-82495746
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY -- Another journalist was attacked Wednesday in Mexico, where three have been killed so far this month.</p> <p>Jose Ignacio Santiago said he narrowly escaped when a car carrying armed assailants tried to cut his vehicle off on a rural highway in the southern state of Oaxaca.</p> <p>Santiago said he was able to escape because he was accompanied by two bodyguards assigned to him under a government program to protect journalists. Santiago had been assigned the guards after he was abducted by a gang in 2017.</p> <p>The attack comes one day after press groups held more than a dozen demonstrations throughout Mexico Tuesday to protest the killings of three journalists since the start of the year.</p> <p>Santiago said the bodyguard driving him was able to outmaneuver the attackers, but the assailants opened fire when they saw the journalist's car escaping. Santiago, the director of an online news site, was not injured.</p> <p>He had been taping video in a remote Triqui Indigenous area, and that may have angered one of the groups battling for control of the region.</p> <p>“I don't think I have any problems in that area, but they may not have liked seeing news media in the area,” said Santiago. “It is a Triqui area.”</p> <p>Some 10,000 Triquis live in remote, impoverished communities in the mountains of Oaxaca. Three Triqui groups are locked in a decades-long armed struggle that has seen dozens of killings. In 2010, a Finnish human rights observer and a Mexican political activist were shot to death in the same area.</p> <p>Attacks on journalists have spiked this month.</p> <p>In the border city of Tijuana, two journalists were killed in the space of a week. On Jan. 17, crime photographer Margarito Martínez was gunned down outside his home. And on Jan. 23, reporter Lourdes Maldonado López was found shot to death inside her car.</p> <p>On Jan. 10, reporter José Luis Gamboa was killed in the Gulf coast state of Veracruz.</p>

	<p>Officials have acknowledged that more than 90% of murders of journalists and rights defenders remain unresolved, despite a government system meant to protect them.</p> <p>The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists puts the percentage at 95%, said its Mexico representative Jan-Albert Hootsen.</p> <p>Laura Sanchez, a journalist from Baja California living in Mexico City, ridiculed the government program that is supposed to protect journalists Tuesday. The government program often gives journalists a button fob that can sound an emergency alarm, but some say it is useless.</p> <p>“What they give us is a damned panic button, and you know what that button is? It is the number of the municipal police supervisor who is corrupt and sold out,” Sanchez said.</p> <p>Mexico remains the most dangerous place in the Western Hemisphere for journalists. The government says 52 journalists or media workers have been slain in Mexico since December 2018.</p> <p>It says seven of the 52 killed were enrolled in the protection program.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Suspect in deputy killing arrested Mexico
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/man-suspected-killing-texas-deputy-arrested-mexico/story?id=82483854
GIST	<p>A fugitive suspected of ambushing and gunning down a Texas deputy constable during a traffic stop over the weekend in Houston has been taken into custody in Mexico, authorities said Wednesday.</p> <p>Oscar Rosales, 51, has been charged with capital murder in the fatal shooting of Cpl. Charles Galloway of Harris County Constable Precinct 5.</p> <p>His arrest comes amid a string of shootings of law enforcement officers across the country in the past few days, including two New York City police officers who were killed while answering a domestic violence call Friday and a sheriff's deputy in Milwaukee who was shot multiple times following a traffic stop early Wednesday morning.</p> <p>Rosales was the subject of a nationwide manhunt until he was taken into custody at a hotel in Ciudad Acuña, Mexico, a border city about 575 miles west of Houston, U.S. Marshal Deputy Cameron Welch told ABC station KTRK in Houston.</p> <p>His capture was coordinated by the U.S. Marshals' Gulf Coast Violent Offenders Task Force and its Fugitive Task Force in conjunction with Mexican authorities, officials said. U.S. Marshals are working to extradite him back to Harris County.</p> <p>On Monday, Houston Police Chief Troy Finner identified Rosales as the suspect who allegedly gunned down Galloway early Sunday when the deputy pulled over a white Toyota Avalon in a residential neighborhood of southwest Houston.</p> <p>Finner said investigators obtained video of Rosales getting out of the car with an "assault-type weapon" and opening fire on Galloway without warning as the deputy was still seated in his patrol vehicle. He said Galloway, who was shot multiple times, did not have an opportunity to defend himself.</p> <p>Harris County District Attorney Kim Ogg said Rosales' wife, Reina Marquez, and her brother, Henri Mauricio Pereira Marquez, have both been arrested on charges of tampering with evidence.</p> <p>Finner said Reina Marquez and her brother are alleged to have tampered with the Toyota Avalon, which has since been recovered by police.</p>

	<p>Galloway's death comes about three months after Harris County Constable Precinct 4 Deputy Kareem Atkins, 30, was shot to death in an ambush outside a Houston sports bar that also left Atkins' partner wounded. A 19-year-old suspect was arrested in December and charged with capital murder.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Wisconsin police are searching for a suspect who shot a 26-year-old Milwaukee County Sheriff's deputy around 2 a.m on Wednesday when the deputy pulled a car over for a registration violation, Milwaukee County Sheriff Earnell Lucas said at a news conference.</p> <p>Lucas said one of the vehicle's occupants got out and ran, and the deputy was shot multiple times while chasing the man. A second occupant of the car was arrested, officials said.</p> <p>The deputy, a member of the Milwaukee County Sheriff's Office for 18 months, was shot in both arms and his torso, Lucas said. He said the deputy was being treated for non-life-threatening injuries.</p> <p>On Friday night, 22-year-old rookie New York City police officer Jason Rivera and his partner, Officer Wilbert Mora, 27, were shot when they responded to a domestic incident in Harlem. Rivera died at a hospital shortly after the incident, and Mora died on Tuesday. The suspect was fatally shot in the episode.</p> <p>On Dec. 29, Bradley, Illinois, Police Sgt. Marlene Rittmanic, 49, was fatally shot and her partner was wounded when they responded to a barking dog complaint at a hotel. Two people were arrested in the case, including one who allegedly shot Rittmanic with her own gun, and are facing the death penalty if convicted.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/26 Arrest: sold gun used synagogue shooting
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/man-arrested-allegedly-selling-gun-hostage-incident-texas/story?id=82492622
GIST	<p>A man faces a federal charge for allegedly selling the gun used in the Texas synagogue hostage situation earlier this month, authorities said.</p> <p>Henry Williams, 32, faces one charge of being a felon in possession of a firearm in connection with the hostage crisis at Congregation Beth Israel in the Fort Worth suburb of Colleyville on Jan. 15.</p> <p>The armed suspect, identified by authorities as 44-year-old British citizen Malik Faisal Akram, died in the incident when an FBI hostage rescue team breached the synagogue after an 11-hour standoff.</p> <p>Investigators allege Williams sold Akram a Taurus G2C pistol on Jan. 13, two days before the hostage incident.</p> <p>The FBI said it discovered Williams' alleged ties to Akram through an analysis of Akram's phone records after his death.</p> <p>Agents first interviewed Williams on Jan. 16, during which he allegedly said he recalled meeting "a man with a British accent," the Department of Justice said.</p> <p>Agents interviewed Williams again after his arrest on an outstanding state warrant on Monday, during which he allegedly confirmed he sold Akram the handgun at an intersection in South Dallas after viewing a photo of the suspect, according to the Justice Department.</p> <p>"Williams allegedly admitted to officers that Mr. Akram told him the gun was going to be used for 'intimidation' to get money from someone with an outstanding debt," the Department of Justice said in a statement.</p> <p>Cellphone records for both men also show their phones were in close proximity on Jan. 13, according to prosecutors.</p>

Williams was arrested Tuesday on the firearm charge and made his first appearance before a magistrate judge Wednesday afternoon. According to the Department of Justice, Williams was previously convicted of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon and attempted possession of a controlled substance.

"Federal firearm laws are designed to keep guns from falling into dangerous hands. As a convicted felon, Mr. Williams was prohibited from carrying, acquiring, or selling firearms," U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Texas Chad Meacham said in a statement. "Whether or not he knew of his buyer's nefarious intent is largely irrelevant -- felons cannot have guns, period, and the Justice Department is committed to prosecuting those who do."

A detention hearing has been scheduled for Monday. ABC News has reached out to Williams' attorney for comment.

A rabbi and three members of the synagogue were taken hostage during the incident. All four managed to escape unharmed.

FBI agents said the suspect was demanding the release of a convicted terrorist and believe the location was intentionally targeted because it was the closest synagogue to Carswell Air Force Base near Fort Worth, where the prisoner is being held.

Multiple law enforcement sources told ABC News the suspect was demanding the release of Aafia Siddiqui, who was convicted of assault and attempted murder of a U.S. soldier in 2010 and sentenced to 86 years in prison.

In the weeks since the incident, investigators have been digging into the suspect's social media and personal devices to try and find out more about his travel and associates.

Four men have also been arrested in England within the past week as part of the probe, British authorities said.

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HEADLINE	01/26 Laser temporarily blinds helicopter crew
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/laser-temporarily-blinds-medical-helicopter-crew-member/story?id=82465553
GIST	<p>A paramedic was temporarily blinded after their helicopter was affected by a laser strike earlier this month.</p> <p>A Utah AirMed helicopter was struck while transporting a patient to the University of Utah hospital. A crew member aboard the flight experienced temporary blindness and blurred vision from the laser.</p> <p>"They were able to safely land in our hospital, and once they were able to transfer the patient, the crew member was seen in the emergency room," Nathan Morreale, chief flight paramedic for Utah AirMed told ABC News.</p> <p>The crew member is back on the job but has experienced lingering blindness in his peripheral vision, Morreale said.</p> <p>"The safety of our patients and our crews are at the forefront of everything we do," Morreale said. "Even though our crews are highly trained for circumstances and scenarios, there's no amount of training that can prepare you for what happens when a laser hits your eye and causes temporary blindness."</p> <p>The Federal Aviation Administration said its Flight Standards District Office is looking into the incident. Laser incidents have been on the rise in recent years, according to the agency. The FAA reported 6,852 laser incidents in 2020, up from 6,136 in 2019. It's the highest reported number of incidents since 2016.</p> <p>Intentionally aiming lasers at aircraft violates federal law. Individuals may face up to \$11,000 in civil penalties per violation and up to \$30,800 for multiple incidents.</p>

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